Kentucky ghostscapes: Stories

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Kentucky ghostscapes: Stories

by

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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

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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2017

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the Creative Writing and Environment Program at Iowa State University and the faculty members who so graciously devoted their thought and time to my development as a writer. I want to especially thank my adviser, K.L. Cook—a mentor in the truest sense of the word, who spent hours sifting through my evolving prose and ultimately convinced me that a book could be salvaged from the wreckage. Baby Tyrant, the starring ghost of Ghostscapes, would not exist in his present, looming incarnation, without Professor Cook’s careful, meticulous, and empathetic guidance.

I also want to thank my creative writing colleagues who met Baby Tyrant early on and tolerated him, who gave much needed advice along the way, who inspire me, and who continue to encourage me in my personal and artistic obsession with the Bluegrass State.

Thank you to the writers of my state as well—Gurney Norman, Wendell Berry, Bobbie Ann Mason, and others—who taught me the artistic power and social value of regional literature.

Finally, thank you to my parents, John and Susan Hart, who raised me with tenderness, told me to pursue my dreams—no matter how whacky or non-lucrative—and who will never read my writing, if I can find a way to spare them from it.
ABSTRACT

Kentucky Ghostscapes is a collection of stories that follow the life and psychological development of Kentucky native Lizzy Black, a student of cultural anthropology and aspiring writer who often reflects upon the vibrant presence of wayward family members in her early childhood, Kentucky’s infamous past as a site of colonization, slavery, and genocide, Kentucky agriculture, native plants, and the processes of life, death, and rebirth that make the present world possible.

The collection begins with the title piece “Kentucky Ghostscapes,” a story in which Lizzy, the writer, meditates upon a visit home, where she and her father, Joe, tour the family’s cattle farm, and Joe “shows” her living and nonliving elements of landscape that no longer physically exist. Working from this experience, Lizzy begins to articulate her notion of “ghostscapes,” and, through her meditation, traces the ways in which various ghosts continue to haunt and shape her internal world and conceptions of home.

In other first-person stories—“Pawpaws,” “Green Worms And Other Displaced Things,” and “Lizzy’s Dream”—Lizzy reflects upon her relationships with plants, men, and Kentucky, and are, like “Ghostscapes,” written in a non-linear, associative structure, and further explore and clarify the topography of Lizzy’s internal landscape. Lizzy returns to investigate her ghostscapes more fully in “The Anthropologist Returns Home,” a connective story written from an omniscient perspective, where Lizzy makes a last-ditch attempt to exorcise the spirit of her grandfather, who everyone referred to as Baby Tyrant, from his rusted-out Cadillac Eldorado. She fails.
In “Happy Birthday, Baby Tyrant,” we meet six-year-old Lizzy and her whiskey-guzzling grandfather on his sixty-third birthday. As Lizzy waits for Baby Tyrant on a stone fence line, she sees his pick-up barreling towards her at full speed, without a driver. Lizzy jumps out of the truck’s path and survives, but the incident, unless properly exorcised, will haunt her for the rest of her life.
As the title of my book suggests, I am a writer preoccupied with Kentucky’s past and how this past continues to inform the state’s present. I grew up in Richmond, Kentucky, a town of about 30,000 people, sitting near the Kentucky River and Fort Boonesborough, a frontier fort settled by Daniel Boone and fellow colonists in 1775. At the present-day site, commemorated, in part, by an open-air, limestone replica of the fort, visitors will also encounter a handful of racist monuments erected in the thirties to celebrate the westward expansion of “the white race” and the realization of its “destiny.” Once a year, descendants of original settlers gather in tents at Fort Boonesborough State Park to meet with archeologists and other specialists in attempts to reconstruct fragmentary family legacies.

I’m a descendant of a settler with an unfortunate last name—Captain David Gass. If you ever travel to the fort, not the stone replica, but the larger, wooden replica situated at the park’s entrance, you’ll find my great-great-something’s name on the tall, limestone monument standing outside the fort. I’ve been to the site. I’ve seen his name in that overwhelming sprawl of other names. Still, I’ve never felt especially keen on gathering beneath tents, hip to hip with fellow white Kentuckians, to know our history better. For as long as I can remember, I’ve never felt proud of that past.

Perhaps, it was my ambivalence about the past that led me to study cultural anthropology at the University of Kentucky as an undergraduate. I wanted to situate myself in a cultural and geopolitical context that felt historically honest, and though the
work contained in *Ghostscapes* is not a work of anthropology, I carry that perspective with me, and it continues to inform my art.

I come from a farming family that’s lived and worked in the transition zone between Kentucky’s Bluegrass Region (better known to outsiders as Horse Country) and Appalachia, for generations. In Madison County, my home county, the hills are not rolling but steep. My maternal grandmother’s expletive of choice is “fetchin’,” and, true to stereotype, we eat heaping plates of cornbread and soup beans seasoned with lard. Pre-emancipation, my mother’s family, part of the land-owning elite, purchased and owned slaves. I wish it hadn’t been so, but the deeds at the Madison County courthouse confirm that it was.

The weather back home is strange. Creeks often flood, especially in spring, when the roads, long-neglected by state coffers, overflow with silty water and uprooted vegetation. How much of this flooding originates from the natural vagaries of weather or global warming, and how much of it stems directly from the recent proliferation of shopping centers and subdivisions near the interstate, is an enduring mystery and rich source of personal and artistic frustration. All in all, I find Kentucky’s past and present quite frustrating. Post-colonization, my family has played a role in all that Kentucky’s been, and in all that it’s become, and this legacy, whatever it is or has been, haunts me.

Because I am haunted by the past of my state, and by my family’s complicity in this past, my writing differs somewhat from much of the writing endemic to my region. Kentucky has a rich literary scene. It’s had one for a long while. Perhaps the best-known author of my state, one of international renown, is agrarian essayist, fiction writer, and poet Wendell Berry. In his many, many works, Berry depicts a close relationship between
the fictional Kentucky community of Port Royal and the land on which community members live and farm—and also, the personal, communal, and environmental disaster that ensues when community members break these ties in the pursuit of the urbanite’s “modernity.” Berry’s fiction, poetry, and nonfiction contain magically real elements, in that the past very much pervades the present like a palpable force that characters feel. Though this is certainly a kind of haunting, the historical haunting I’m after in *Kentucky Ghostscapes* is more gothic in nature, Southern Gothic.

Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner—these authors, within their specific temporal contexts, dramatized the grotesque aspects of their home societies in the ghostly, dilapidated setting of the antebellum South. Among southern states, Kentucky, a border state where both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis were born, is its own situation. As in the deep South, Kentucky’s landscape remains top-heavy with the ruins of a past, less-just world. The dark, deadeye windows of decaying farm manses stare past abandoned tobacco barns and out upon the winding country roads that border creek beds fouled by livestock refuse and carcasses. *Ghostscapes* is a partial investigation of this ruin, of the complex human relationships with self, fellow humans, and land that spring up from this decay long after its immediate historical context has passed.

Kentucky anthropologist, Ann Kingsolver (the sister of bestselling novelist, Barbara Kingsolver) coined the term “phantom landscapes” in her 2011 ethnography, *Tobacco Town Futures*. Phantom landscapes include the nonvisible components of landscape—long-gone barns, mills, out buildings, cemeteries, roads, and trees—that are no longer physically present yet sill loom large in the imaginations of community
members who remember their existences and use these memories to both navigate and create place.

This book is my attempt to exorcise these ghostscapes through the written word. In Kentucky Ghostscapes, a story collection based in east-central Kentucky, the reader will meet Kentucky native Lizzy Black, a young doctoral student in anthropology and an aspiring writer who uses storytelling to exorcise the ghost of her drunken, impish grandfather, Baby Tyrant, among many others, from her imagination. Cultural anthropologists use the term “exorcism” to reference the eradication of evil spirits through ritual. Writing is one of Lizzy’s rituals, and in her quest to exorcise, heal, and create artistic truth, she pays storytelling tribute to other ghosts that linger among the hills overlooking small, slithering Devil’s Creek, a waterway bloated with rain, vegetation, and animal carcasses that infuses the air and all surrounding life with its particular scent of life and decay.

In the tradition of Kingsolver, Lizzy coins the term ghostscapes to summarize the omnipresence of human and non-human ghosts—Baby Tyrant, Old Man Barns, long-dead slaves, tenant farmers, farm cats, a defunct Cadillac Eldorado, sinkholes that disappear then reappear, trees, root cellars, and other ghosts—all of which dominate her perception of home. These ghosts haunt Lizzy’s psyche and inspire her creative work, a series of essay-stories—“Green Worms and Other Displaced Matter,” “Kentucky Ghostscapes,” and “Pawpaws”—in which Lizzy meditates on romantic relationships, the role of patriarchy in women’s lives, the lives of plants, ghosts, and Kentucky’s problematic past as a site of colonization, genocide, slavery, and patriarchy. All the
pieces of this book are ordered to inform and enrich one another, to have conversations with one another about Lizzy Black and the nature of her internal ghostscapes.

Another essay-story, “Lizzy’s Dream” is more surrealist in its conception. “Lizzy’s Dream,” illustrates Lizzy’s ambivalent relationship with the late Baby Tyrant through an imagistic dream sequence set on a tropical island, depicting Lizzy’s unconscious mind as she confronts her complex feelings about Baby Tyrant’s alcoholism, extramarital affair, and charismatic, yet dangerous personality.

In the tradition of Indian writer Arhundati Roy, best known for her 1997 novel The God of Small Things, the two longer stories of this collection—“Happy Birthday, Baby Tyrant” and “The Anthropologist Returns Home”—adopt a neutral omniscient perspective in which the story shifts, quickly, from the interior world of one character to another, often within the same paragraph. As I wrote “Happy Birthday, Baby Tyrant,” the most technically ambitious story in the collection, I employed writerly discipline and restraint to ensure that future readers of the piece would not become lost on the meandering, omniscient wave of that narrative. “Happy Birthday, Baby Tyrant” is the anchor story of my collection, and as I stumbled deeper and deeper into the family narrative revealed within it, I realized that my time with Baby Tyrant and Lizzy’s family had only just begun.

Though complete in its conception, Ghostscapes is, I now see, the beginning of a much larger, perhaps multi-book project in which I will continue to investigate the internal life of Lizzy Black and her urge to understand, exorcise, and make peace with the ghosts of her imagination.
hear them cry
the long dead
the long gone
speak to us
from beyond the grave

—bell hooks *Appalachian Elegy*
Part I.
Kentucky Ghostscapes

I.

At twenty-four, during a short, holiday respite from graduate school, I retire from the cornfields and piercing winds of Iowa to the subtropical hills of Kentucky, where my parents and maternal grandmother live. On this trip, I ask my father to show me the ghostscape of our family’s two-hundred-year-old farm, a shadow world of people, trees, and buildings that exists in the liminal space between history and the present. Each day, as my father works cattle, he visits and revisits this world, and, on this particular trip home, I have finally worked up the gumption to ask him to show me the parts of our farm that elude my immediate vision. Our first stop is a cemetery.

Beneath a living mausoleum of trees, one of several groves remaining on the farm, the seven limestone tombs, each one engraved with a name or date now impossible to read, look forgotten. These graves existed before my grandmother’s farm did. Perhaps they existed before Kentucky did, in the 1700s, when early white settlers roamed the hilly, wooded region called Transylvania, ready to shoot human and non-human natives upon first startle. These settlers bedded down in bamboo-like canebrakes for the night to avoid Indian capture. They drank from the cool, limestone creek beds. They laughed. They worked. Sometimes they died.

I bend down and touch a grave worn so soft, not only by wind and microbes and rain, but by the moist noses of my father’s cattle, and of my grandfather’s cattle, and of my great-grandfather’s cattle, and of my great-great-great-grandfather’s cattle before
them—the crushing weight of generations upon generations of those enormous, shade-seeking bodies.

It’s a windy day and the tree canopy above me shakes, so I push myself up to take in crowns still empty from the winter’s cold and deep green pines. These trees that cover the graves—the pines and persimmons and the oaks and the hickories—many of them a hundred years old or more, were not yet saplings when the men, women, and children who occupy the graves died and were buried here. The trees of that time, if they hadn’t been cut away before the burials occurred, died long ago. Before the trees died, some of them sported trunks the width of dinner tables. Most of them, though, out- branched, out-rooted, fungus-ridden, or choked off by poison ivy, never generated spores or seeds. On the interior corner of the farm, however, a stand of hickory trees lines the bed of a perennial creek. The hickories are a tree family. They are the lucky ones.

Near a fallen, hollowed-out tree, I kneel down beside two graves, infant-sized. No slumbering lambs appear on these stones, and even the moss, a popular haunt of graveyards, has long since abandoned them. Sometimes, perhaps after a hundred years or more, a body decays for so long and so well that the matter itself becomes a silent echo of the awkward arrangement of flesh and bone it once was. It becomes a ghost of a ghost, the raw fodder with which the world will continue to make and remake itself.

My father and I don’t speak while we visit this place. More than anything hallowed, we have always appreciated the large, pine-lined silences, and their power to swallow our senses whole.

As we continue our trek across the farm, my father shows me more tree ghosts, two house ghosts, three road ghosts, one creek ghost, and four drainage-ditch ghosts. He
shows me the swollen body of a critter that fell into the cistern he uses to water his cattle. Its body is as slimy as an internal organ. The rat, or whatever it once was, isn’t a ghost yet, but it will be, several months or years down the road, weather willing. Drainage-ditch ghosts, however, play by their own rules.

Drainage ditch ghosts are the perennial haunts of the Kentucky farm. Push soil into their waters, and they’ll come back with the first thaw, surer and stronger of their natural courses than they were pre-filling. It’s the same with sinkhole ghosts, so common to my karst homeland. Fill them in with dirt and old washers and dryers or other human junk. In a few months, their earthen jaws will open wide, ready to swallow unsuspecting cattle, pit bulls, or children whole.

And then, at the bottom of a hill, no living person on Devil’s Creek knows exactly which hill, live the ghosts that no one talks about. My father doesn’t talk about them. My mother doesn’t talk about them. My grandmother doesn’t talk about them. No one does. Yet they sit on rocks at the bottom of the hill all the same, breaking beans, stripping tobacco, listening to the sweet water run out from the land to fill the rivers and oceans of this world. In this place, they who sit on the rocks are the silent sentinels of their own histories. No one acknowledges them—or not for long, anyway, and never with ease.

Old Man Barns, however, a farming neighbor and family friend, newly dead, once did acknowledge them.

I was eleven at the time, and my parents and I were at a dinner party. My father had noticed a collection of limestone rocks down at the bottom of the hill with a strong resemblance, in their arrangement and size, to gravestones. In shape and texture, the stones looked cruder than tombstones, had perhaps been fashioned with farming implements, or
not at all. In the Barns’s dining room, the lamplight spilled across the wooden table and onto Old Man Barns’s face. He looked at my father.

“Did you ever notice some odd stones down at the bottom of one of those hills on your property?” Old Man Barns asked, raising a chocolate pie-laden fork towards his mouth.

Mrs. Barns fixed the most succulent chocolate pies. Two slices already rested snugly in my stomach.

My father wiped merengue from his beard with a paper towel. “I think I know which ones you mean. Slave graves?” my father asked.

“Slave graves,” Old Man Barns confirmed, shaking his lean face in and out of the light, before leveling another column of quivering chocolate with his open mouth.

“Where are the slave graves?” I asked, my lips muddied with pie, but no one answered me; the conversation, along with those who led it, had moved on, but I started to see the ghosts, and I see them still, living their lives in limbo, swinging their feet near the water, waiting.

Now Old Man Barns is a ghost, his grave, fresh as a flower in the city cemetery, a fifteen-mile drive from his rural home, and I wonder how long it will be before no one visits him anymore. At least he’s a ghost in a sea of other ghosts. He knew where he would rest in death, had a rough idea of the smooth stone that would carry his name into the future. But if the ghosts at the bottom of the hill, those who, perhaps, created the fires in the fireplaces of my ancestral home could speak, I don’t know what they would say, or in what language. Perhaps one of them, similar to the mother of Isaac Johnson, a former Kentucky slave and slave narrative writer, was snatched up from Madagascar as she sat,
staring into the rounded, fat-finger boughs of a baobab tree. But she and others like her didn’t write the history books. Slave families didn’t get to choose their haunts.

II.

When I was a teenager, I used to lie in bed at night, head turned towards my bedroom window, watching the dark shade spread out from the bottoms of the trees until it covered the rest of the world. As night fell, and darkness broke like a bruise across the sky, my body would begin to groan like a haunted house. Animated from feet to brain by the creeping vines of my nervous system, my slick insides and moon-colored bones would generate the kinds of dreams that only become visible by night. Through the serrated leaves of the beech tree that leaned against my window, the moon shined like a face, and I would quickly close my blinds to obstruct the flow of its light, the effect it can have on sensitive people like me. But the light always found a way in, making dreams.

One night, when I was fifteen, I dreamed that I was crouching before the fireless hearth of my maternal grandmother’s two-hundred-year-old home. The cold air caught in my throat like menthol, and a low voice began to summon me from the fireplace. “Shari,” it said. “Shari.” In wide, tunneling motions, the disembodied syllables gusted around a bedroom that hadn’t known human sleep in years, becoming, by turns, louder, then softer, then louder, then softer again. I closed my eyes, hoping the voice would leave, but it didn’t. “Shari,” the voice whispered. “Shari. Shari. Shari.”

Shari is my mother’s childhood name, but sometimes it became my name, too, when I sat in the passenger seat of my grandmother’s 1992 Cadillac Deville, and she
looked over at me from the wheel, almost veering off the road. “Shari—uh, I mean, Lizzy,” she would say. Like a proper Kentucky grandmother, she also called me Sugar Boogie, Sweet Pumpkin Pie, and Baby Doll, but this voice I heard, soft and sterile as ash, dripped none of her syrup.

Still kneeling, I felt my heart tremble as I registered a chill in the room distinct from the old home’s lack of fire or central heating. I didn’t want to open my eyes, but when I did, I saw my great-grandmother’s face quivering above the empty grate, in gray scale, like a hologram version of the photograph that sits on the dresser in my parents’ bedroom. Her collar was high, her neck long, her eyebrows arched, and her schoolmarm bun, too high and tight on her skull. Her large eyes, so similar to my mother’s, gleamed like cold graphite.


“I’m not Shari,” I said. “That’s my mother’s name.”

My great-grandmother coughed and ashes fell from her mouth. There weren’t any ashes in the fireplace she hovered within, and yet, the ashes emerged from her body, as if they had been blown out from a massive fire, all fluttery and soft, like cigarette embers, or snow. My body stiffened.

“Oh,” she said, nonchalantly licking soot from her lips, and though I knew she could see me—the light pulsing from her eyes indicated that she could see me—there remained something blind in her look, something opaque, something dead.
She would never know the world that I knew, just as I would never know the world that she knew in life, yet we did share some of the same life. My body rivers overflowed with her blood.

“All the same,” she said, as if reading my mind, “I’d like to show you some things.”

She never smiled. In the photos, she never smiled either. Gray ashes peppered the fine openings of her nostrils. In the photos, her nostrils looked delicate and clean.

“What things?” I asked.

Her eyes became fire. “Everything,” she said, and then my beautiful, dead great-grandmother did smile, in the slow, eerie way that the Hollywood dead always do, and I wished she hadn’t.

III.

In 1997, when I was six years old, my maternal grandparents’ two-hundred-year-old farm looked like a movie set from the 1950s. A long gravel drive led up to a grass and gravel driveway where two baby blue Cadillacs from the 1970s sat, a bit rusty around the hubcaps, but still operable. Next to the driveway, the old farmhouse stood covered in white siding with stacked limestone lining its base and two brick chimneys crumbling away from its sides. At some point, my grandparents had elected to cover the back porch in green AstroTurf, which I enjoyed sitting on because of its visual similarity, and textural contrast, to grass. A black metal water pump engraved with flowers stood near the back door like a human presence, waiting.
During my mother’s girlhood, in the 1960s, the metal pump had provided her with water from a cistern that my grandfather rarely cleaned. Sometimes, unlucky creatures—opossums, raccoons, skunks, or rats—would fall into the deep water and drown, fouling it with their bloated bodies for years to come. Devil’s Creek farmers regularly checked their cisterns for these critters; my grandfather, for reasons unknown, did not. My father, who grew up in several southeastern cities, has always attributed my mother’s strong stomach to the gallons upon gallons of dirty cistern water she drank as a child, but my mother is strong in more places than her stomach. Sometimes, for reasons similarly unknown, my grandfather didn’t speak to anyone for months. “Bipolar,” my father says. My mother doesn’t talk about it.

To the right of the AstroTurf porch loomed a large tree. I can no longer remember which kind, but its center looked gnarled and rotted-out with age. Its reaching limbs that shrieked with frog songs by night overshadowed a small mound of grass-covered earth that my ancestors used as a root cellar. Below ground, the structure’s inner chamber sat level with the tree’s dying roots, its sole occupants a petrified ham, eaten by no one, and two Mason jars of rank chow-chow goop.

Above ground, on the other side of the tree, wrapped up in bushy scarves of poison ivy and orange trumpet creeper vines, the old wooden outhouse leaned into the wind, skimming the air for gossip left over from the days of the old telephone party lines, while two crumpled Sears-catalog pages knocked around inside. The shed where the black kitten once slept three weeks in a drawer unfit for squirming fur was so swollen with moisture that I thought it might explode. No one ever told me what happened to the
kitten, but I knew. Coyotes. Whenever I stayed with my grandparents, I heard them yipping in the hills.

Mimicking the motions of the cattle that grazed in the field in front of me, I used to spend time noting the wads of ochre-colored chewing tobacco that my grandfather spat onto the ground, and how they would glisten when the sun struck them. Most of the globules revolved around the baby blue natural gas tank. The tank stood pert and fat as a pig in the evening light. I used to slap its wide rump, and give it a quick, two-fingered salute, before stalking on.

More fox than cow, I would snake along the fence line, hunching low and raising my feet high, before placing them back on the grass without a sound. The black fence sagged with age. The shy-eyed cattle chewed their cud and whopped flies off their overheated bodies with rope-like tails. My grandmother’s blouses snapped against the wind on the clothesline behind me. When I grew tired of agitating the cattle, I would grab some wooden clothespins off the line and pinch myself with them. Once I tired of this activity, I’d eat cherries. Sweet, tart cherries from the old black cherry tree. I never washed them or pried open their skins to extract resident worms, but popped them in my mouth right away: one cherry, two cherries, three cherries, four.

A few more years and the tree would be dead. I didn’t know that then. I kept picking and eating all the sweet, tart cherries that I could reach until my stomach pooched out like a pregnant lady’s, then I would waddle into my grandmother’s kitchen—she wasn’t there—and on into the living room, where my grandfather sat, snoring a rumbly, Marlboro snore, in his La-Z-Boy chair. I watched his whiskey-barrel belly rise and fall like a slumbering beast. If he’d been awake, I’d have taken a running leap onto his gut,
and sat on it like a beanbag. Instead, I observed the cigarettes and pen in his left breast pocket as the cool waters of sleep rippled over his tan, still-handsome face.

When my grandfather was a toddler, he emptied a pan of bacon grease onto his head. My mother showed me the yellow newspaper clipping: *Burned Baby*, it read. His mother, my great-grandmother, pregnant with her second child, lost the baby shortly thereafter. As I leaned over my grandfather, I couldn’t see any scars on his face, but my mother said his skin was full of cancer. I didn’t want to look any closer.

While my grandfather snorted and carried on, I tiptoed across the living room floor and opened the wood and glass-paned door that separated the warm, lived-in part of my grandparents’ home from the cold, impossibly clean part where pieces of floral glassware glistened on every table and made beds remained made. There were blue willow plates and green lamps made delicate by the particular bulbous warping of their pale green glass and pink, brush-stroke flowers. These small, elaborate rooms, without a surface for sitting, formed the front of the house, the old part, built by my ancestors two hundred years prior when they journeyed into Kentucky with Daniel Boone. Yet, I always found it odd that the walls looked like ordinary walls—nothing log-like about them. This was the nice part of the house. The old part. The clean part. I couldn’t wear my shoes there. The carpet was so white, too white, and the air felt cold in a way that suggested it had been gathering there for a long time. Kind of like the cold air that I knew gathered in Devil’s Creek First Christian Church between Sundays.

My parents didn’t go to church. My grandmother taught Sunday school to the upstanding youths of Devil’s Creek. Sometimes I went with her, and the older kids would hold me in their laps while they analyzed bible verses that all sounded the same to me. I
wanted to be baptized by the preacher who looked like Bill Clinton, so that I could drink grape juice—First Christians don’t drink wine—and eat tasteless wafers, along with the rest of the congregation. I also wanted to go swimming in the baptismal where green water undulated beneath a pastoral scene that I thought must have been heaven. Heaven looked a lot like my grandparents’ farm, something I never pointed out to my grandmother.

As I tiptoed around this part of the house, I remembered something Helen, my babysitter, had told me. She said the world was full of spirits, that they walked around everywhere like shadows that we couldn’t see. They walked through us and around us. They weren’t scary, and they weren’t scared, they just were. She also told me ghost stories about the spirits of babies abandoned by their mothers that cried out from the tobacco fields at night, and about the bags of potatoes that split, wide open in attics, without explanation. Helen fixed the best biscuits and gravy in the world. She also cooked me poke greens that looked like ordinary weeds—straight from her yard! Whatever she said, I believed.

I believed that there were spirits in the room with me as I peered into that empty fireplace. And I knew that they especially lived in the closet in the bedroom at the top of the tight, wooden staircase with the old books that smelled of mothballs and mildew. Some of these spirits were content, benevolent souls, while others were shadowy, neglected, and evil. People had been living and dying in this house for a long time. My old fat Aunt Margaret, who was mean to her younger, prettier sister, and who wore red and white polka-dot dresses on Sundays, had died in this house; my great-grandmother had died in this house, as had my lean, hymn-singing great-grandfather, along with many
others, and even though they were my ancestors, I hoped they wouldn’t show themselves to me. I hoped they would remain invisible shadows in the shifting light of their world, unseen. But the older I got, and continue to get, the more ghosts I could and can see. They really are everywhere, walking up hills, filling up empty valleys, fouling the water or air with their decay, thinking their collapsed, suspended thoughts that fall and spark like ash, dying second and third and fourth and fifth deaths to become the world that we know.
The Anthropologist Returns Home

On the fifteenth anniversary of her grandfather, Baby Tyrant’s, birthday, twenty-five-year-old Lizzy Black returned to her small community of Devil’s Creek to live in the old tenant house on her family’s farm. She came brandishing empty composition books, the beginning of a dissertation for her doctoral degree in Cultural Anthropology, and what her father Joe called college-girl words—patriarchy, gender roles, hegemonic ideologies—language dense with theory, which rolled off Lizzy’s tongue, crystalline and sharp as pulled sugar.

Once her parents gave her the go-ahead, Lizzy set up camp in the white, concrete blockhouse where Baby Tyrant and G.J., both dead, once lived. She installed WiFi and shook opportunistic spiders, large and small, out from bed sheets that hadn’t been washed in fifteen years. She lit aromatic candles that emitted sultry, swirling smoke, washed dishes back into use, and unleashed steady streams of Windex, ammonia, and Soft Scrub onto every grubby, grimy surface until the structure nearly vibrated with cleanness.

Nosy neighbors, living on adjacent hills, got out their binoculars to watch Lizzy from afar. They watched her unload books, flick her hair against the air like a horse’s tail, and pull her jeans up over her neon pink thong. Aunt May, who lived on the hill across the creek, silently swore she saw Lizzy rolling a joint on the hood of her truck in broad daylight. A young farm boy named Carter wondered if the kindly looking young woman would scare away the swamp monster while he and his dog, Max, picked blackberries in the valley. The only remaining farm cat, who Joe had named Harry, glowered at Lizzy from the hill where he sat, flicking his tail against the grasses, while the opossum’s young, who lived beneath the tenant house porch and sensed the arrival of a new presence
in the structure above them, clung more tightly to their mother’s tail. Things were
happening on the Black farm. After a long absence, the neurotic daughter had returned,
and the neighbors wanted to know why. They weren’t alone.

“What exactly are you going to be researching again?” Joe asked.

He and Lizzy stood at the bottom of a hill on the farm with their bare arms
pressed into the top layer of the wooden fence line bordering Devil’s Creek. Joe lit a
cigarette and blew smoke Lizzy’s way. The smoke stung her nose.

“Oh, the decline of the tobacco industry in Madison County,” she said, choking.

“Women and tobacco, tobacco and colonialism, kinship in the region. That kind of
thing.”

The words came out fast, and windy, like an apology. She didn’t tell him that she
had come back to resurrect ghosts, to make the dead live again through stories, and she
certainly didn’t mention Baby Tyrant—his father, her grandfather. But Joe had a smart,
discerning mind, and Lizzy wondered if he was onto her. Tonight, they would celebrate
Baby Tyrant’s birthday by venturing out to his old Cadillac, which sat in an empty
tobacco field like a monument. Joe never enjoyed the celebration, as Lizzy’s attempts to
exorcise Baby Tyrant’s spirit from the car always made him uneasy.

“I see,” Joe said, twisting his thin mouth into a pucker and blowing more smoke
Lizzy’s way. His gaze deepened, but he didn’t ask questions, so Lizzy relaxed.

Joe was the keeper of the Black family history. Of all Lizzy’s family members, it
was he who knew the most about the lives and secrets of long-dead relatives, and it was
he who often told lucid stories of them at family gatherings. With the help of alcohol and
the convivial, listening presence of his relatives, he played a trick on the dead. He helped
them live again through stories, until the candle of the tale burned down to the quick, and lives were extinguished into quiet, cobwebby obscurity once more. Joe told stories of Baby Tyrant, yes, but also of Lizzy’s maternal grandfather, as well as the long line of men, mostly farmers and strip miners, who came before them. It was from her father that Lizzy learned to love the stories of everyday people, and especially of her own family members. It was from him, and the other men in her family, that she had inherited, what her mother called “the thinking disease,” a fundamental disposition of the mind that rendered these men meditative, grouchy, and often financially successful. Thanks to Joe’s lucrative cattle business, he and Sharon would soon retire, far away from Kentucky, to a condo in Florida. Baby Tyrant, a FedEx executive who terrorized his underlings, had been a multimillionaire, though know one knew, exactly, where his money had gone.

Lizzy didn’t care much for money. She did care for knowledge—a deep knowledge of the self, her self, in a world that had been uncertain since the night she entered into it: March 17th, 1991. The night she was born, a madman escaped from the psyche ward, the Cold War came to an official close, and the Kentucky tobacco industry began to falter. It wasn’t until she was a few years into graduate school, a coveted position no one in her family had ever occupied, that Lizzy realized her mother had concocted the thinking disease to confer a certain degree of power upon her daughter in a world largely dominated by men—that she saw Lizzy as an extension of both her body and dreams. If Sharon couldn’t overcome the suffocating patriarchy of her small town, she would make certain that her daughter did by bestowing upon her, through an act of language and sheer willpower, the intelligence of the powerful and financially successful men she loved.
Lizzy wasn’t the girl she had been when Joe sent her off to college. He took in the woman she had become and didn’t like it. The books were part of it. Joe didn’t understand why any living person required so many books.

“I don’t know about you anymore,” Joe said. He started to walk away. He had work to do on the farm—fences to mend and cattle to tend, but he turned back Lizzy’s way. “I’ll see you at Baby Tyrant’s birthday celebration this evening. Try not to clutter the place up with all those damn books,” Joe said, and then he was off.

Beneath a brown tarp on the bed of her pickup, Lizzy housed a collection of seminal anthropological texts—or what appeared to be anthropological texts—extensive enough to break an ox’s back. In lieu of earrings, she wore a gel pen behind each ear: one magenta, one green, as well as a metal pendant shaped into a hand of tobacco on her flannel shirt pocket that her maternal grandfather had given her twenty-years before. She wore jeans ripped bare at the knees and G. J.’s snakeskin cowboy boots, which she drove hard into the ground while walking. She liked the heavy feel of the boots on her feet, and also of her black, carefully braided hair, which dangled, heavy and squirming between her shoulders, like a serpent. Under the guise of anthropology, she had returned to her family’s farm on Devil’s Creek, an edenic garden of the old frontier where tobacco now grew almost nowhere, to resurrect ghosts and cultivate myths.

As a child, ghosts had frightened Lizzy and she imagined most of them as evil spirits and witches, waiting on cliffs overlooking the low, snaking creek for which her home community was named—or in some dark corner of an old tobacco barn, to leap upon her like vampires and drink the life from her small, warm body. She also feared the
shadows of dead farm hands that stretched long on the ceiling of the old tenant house at night. She feared the barn snakes and the barn owls, the coyotes that yipped at night, and the bears that had begun to wander into the region, up from the Appalachian Mountains to the south. Even as a young girl, she had feared giving her love to men who did not, and perhaps could not, return it. She had loved Baby Tyrant, as grandchildren love their grandparents, and he had not returned her love, or at least it never felt like he had.

As an adult, she found ghosts, or the idea of them, rather comforting. Life bore hardship and unpredictability. Ghosts were free from the constraints of biological and social existence. They died then somehow kept living the lives that they had already lived, to increasing perfection, through the telling and re-telling of their stories. Their ghost will—those urges the ghosts had to act upon reality and change the world into what they wanted it to be—existed in a state of animated suspension and could not touch Lizzy in an active way. Even so, every time someone knocked on the tenant house door—and Lizzy had welcomed many curious, pie-bearing neighbors over the last day—she expected to see her dead grandfather behind the screen, drunk and ready for the mischief he had too often brought into Lizzy’s childhood.

Though he had been dead for over a decade, Lizzy suspected, as the overly imaginative living often do, that he was still alive—if not alive then raging on as an unsettled spirit who would not be pleased to know his granddaughter aimed to exorcise him from her imagination through storytelling. All these years later, Lizzy still believed that Baby Tyrant’s spirit resided in the golden Cadillac Eldorado he had driven in life. The old sports car, now reduced to a pile of flat tires and gold-tinted rust, rested in an old tobacco field on the family property, overlooking a large manmade pond burbling with
half-dead fish and algal blooms, a panoramic view of Kentucky hills, and, of course, the slow, slithering waters of Devil’s Creek.

In Baby Tyrant’s later years, the car had served as a gleaming testament to his success as a FedEx executive, though the car’s immobility and decay more clearly mirrored his later life and downward spiral into alcoholism. Perhaps the Blacks visited him all these years later, not so much to remember his life, but to make sense of its tragedy. The exact reason for their yearly homage had always been unclear to Joe and Sharon, but crystal clear to Lizzy, who believed Baby Tyrant’s spirit haunted—no, possessed—the defunct car.

And though Sharon and Joe never admitted it outright, Lizzy suspected that they, too, believed Baby Tyrant haunted the car. Joe worked on the farm every day of the year but purposely avoided the field where the car sat, and Sharon, who worked in Lexington and tried to forget that the farm existed, blocked the field and car from her thoughts completely, save for once a year, on Baby Tyrant’s birthday. Lizzy thought of the car and the field every day, and when the anniversary of Baby Tyrant’s birthday rolled around, she was prepared. Each year, Lizzy and her parents drove out to the spot where the Cadillac sat. Now that Lizzy was older, they brought a six-pack of Budweisers along with them.

The Blacks’ neighbors, who lived on proximal hills and often used their binoculars to spy on one another, enjoyed watching the Blacks enact their yearly ritual from afar. Typically, Lizzy, who had spent time in and out of that state mental intuition as a teenager, did something outlandish enough to keep the gossip mill of Devil’s Creek churning for several weeks afterwards. One year, she performed what looked like a
ritualistic dance with closed eyes and candles held in her palms. Another year, she drew a circle in the field dirt near the car and spun round and round within it until she fainted. On yet another occasion, she screamed Baby Tyrant’s name over and over again—to accomplish what, the neighbors couldn’t say, but they watched her. Even when she was a child, she had been odd—the way she talked to herself and stepped in cow pies on purpose, it wasn’t normal—so they watched her, scrutinizing and wary.

On the day of her return, as Lizzy continued to unpack, creek fog, frog song, and a faint mouth of yellow-orange sunset gathered around the farmhouse like a ghost of summer’s passed. Soon her parents would come, and they would drive up to the hill where the Cadillac sat. In the meantime, Lizzy took some time to remember Baby Tyrant on her own. She worked her way over to his old desk, opened the drawer and passed her hands over the gold-studded Cuban cigar box where he once kept, still kept, his finely made pencils and pens. She turned the implements over in her hands, relishing their smoothness. He had used them to write letters and draft out plans for her tree house on graph paper.

Lizzy could have stared at the still-sharp tools all evening. Instead, she closed the box, kissed it, and placed it back in the drawer, before setting up her own laptop and dazzling array of gel pens and notebooks on the desk. She carted her books inside as well—organizing them on Baby Tyrant’s empty bookcase, not alphabetically, but by level of significance to her project. She lined the anthropological texts on the top shelf. She loved Clifford Geertz and his rich depictions of cockfights and notions of subjective experience of culture, so she made his opus a kind of centerpiece on that highest row. In
this way, she began to fill the empty house with the quiet ambition of her adult life—or so it seemed.

Upon a more honest inspection of her library, Lizzy could not deny that the majority of her books were not works of anthropological theory at all, but dreary fiction, mostly by Southern writers—Flannery O’Connor, Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston. Lizzy knew the work of the writers almost as well as she knew her own story. As an adult, she came to care very little for the light in life. Instead, she embraced its gothic darkness. As a Kentuckian, she had grown up hearing stories of Indian captivity and genocide. As a teen, she had scrambled down the bank of the Kentucky River, beer-logged, to confront the smell of the old violence that rose up from the muddy riverbed at the Fort Boonesborough campground. She had also slept all night in her father’s tobacco fields to see whether or not the ghost stories her babysitter Helen had told her of abandoned infants eternally crying out for their mothers were true. They weren’t. It was the tomcats, famished and horny, that cried all night.

After nearly drowning in late teenage depression, induced by a love affair gone awry, Lizzy spent a year at the mental hospital recovering. Though young, she, who was already a person with many ghosts, didn’t want to be an anthropologist at all, but rather the lurking peripheral creature and great cannibal of narratives that all privacy-loving families fear: a storyteller. Lizzy wanted to be a writer, not an academic, and so she stood over her desk, thumbing the neat spine of her Moleskin notebook, wondering how long it would be before her parents, along with everyone else on Devil’s Creek, not excluding the farm cat, found her out.
After unloading her books, setting up her desk, and tending to other necessary
tasks, Lizzy stood, studying herself in the floor-length mirror smudged with black, where
G.J. once applied her lipstick and inserted her fake gel breast enhancers. Lizzy took in the
Goodwill clothes she had selected to downplay her femininity—frowning when she
realized the contrast between the oversized workingman’s shirt and her small-boned
form, had the opposite effect. The shirt, though large, clung to her breasts, and the jeans,
though loose on her legs and waist, clung to her thighs and butt like a second, reptilian
skin. Her rosy knees peeked through the ripped fabric of her pants, as obvious as tree
hollows. Lizzy opened the closet in the only true bedroom, grabbed one of Baby Tyrant’s
old baseball caps, and placed it on her head in a last-ditch attempt to obscure her still-
girlish face, but wasn’t satisfied.

“Fuck it,” she said, crumpling the hat in her fist.

When the doorbell rang, she scurried towards the sound. Sharon and Joe, who had
finally arrived to celebrate Baby Tyrant’s birthday, as well as Lizzy’s homecoming, stood
on the other side of the screen. Sharon clutched baked goods against her large bosoms
like infants. Joe held a six-pack of Budweisers in his hand.

“I brought you some things, sweet pea,” Sharon said.

face, and she mock-swatted the cans.

“Thanks, Mom and Dad,” Lizzy said and opened the door wide to accommodate
Sharon and her dishes and Joe and his beer. They each placed their goods on the
countertop.
In one of the dishes, Lizzy noticed a pot roast, not a cooked one, but an assembled one, in a glass-baking dish. She had always admired her mother’s dexterity in the kitchen, and when Sharon set the dish down on the counter, Lizzy gazed in awe at the carefully quartered onions, cabbages, and carrots. Sharon wore her fuzzy black hair around her pretty, soft-featured face in a bouffantless bouffant; the woman had a lot of hair, which she tortured daily with hairspray and curling irons. Because it was the weekend, she had traded in her workday power suit, in which she managed employees at the Baptist hospital, for exercise clothes, yet she still wore full makeup. At sixty, she still wanted to be known as the pretty woman she had always been. Joe wore khakis, a green and blue plaid shirt with a pen and cigarettes in the breast pocket. A John Deere ball cap covered his bare scalp. His beard was orange and brown and gray. Lizzy knew that her mother hated that beard, which she said was only good for capturing condiments like mustard and mayonnaise.

The family sat down at the small kitchen table and stared at one another, as introverts often do, in a state of awkward suspension. A fly buzzed above them. Lizzy crossed her hands. She wore no makeup, and several strands of prematurely gray hairs fell across her left eyebrow. Lizzy waited for her mother to comment upon her ripped jeans, grungy shirt, and untouched gray streaks—as well as her wayward eyebrow and maxillary hairs, which she hadn’t plucked in several months—but Sharon never said a word. Since Lizzy’s stay at Eastern State Hospital as a teenager, Sharon had stopped offering much more than comfort and general praise. Joe simply knew it was better to say nothing.
Sharon finally spoke. “I have a few more things I want to do before we leave to celebrate Baby Tyrant,” she said.

She stood and returned to the counter, twisting slightly towards Lizzy.

“I brought you some cornbread, too,” she said, then lifted the foil from the sweet-smelling, still-warm bread, which she had baked and transported in a wrought iron skillet. From her chair, Lizzy watched the smoky heat waft off the bread for several seconds before she noticed the soft handprint, pressed delicate as a leaf, at the bread’s center. She smiled. *Magic*, she thought.

“Mom,” she said, still gazing at the handprint. “How did you do it?”

Joe rolled his eyes. He knew what was coming. He also didn’t find the trick nearly as impressive as Lizzy or Sharon did. He found machinery interesting, the construction of barns, and the stock market. Handprints in cornbread, he found both uninteresting and unsanitary.

Sharon smiled and held her index finger up to her red, lip-sticked mouth. “Shhh. It’s a secret,” she said and winked.

Joe rolled his eyes a second time. He reached for his pack of cigarettes. Sharon shot him a wary glance. She could tell he was on the verge of becoming impatient, and when Joe became impatient, he got mean. Sharon’s anxiety was confirmed a second later when Joe stood up.

“I’ve had enough of this girl talk,” he said.

He walked to the door, opened it, leaned out, lit up, and smoked, while Sharon and Lizzy continued to discuss the cornbread.
Sharon glanced at her daughter and began to speak. “Maybe if you’re a good girl and get your dissertation done, we’ll talk. It is a family secret, after all. Everyone thought your great-great-grandmother’s cornbread died with her. No one knew that she taught me how to make it.”

Sharon smiled, got up from the table, and continued unpacking sweetbreads and blackberry preserves she had put away last summer. Lizzy let her mind go to work, reconstructing the myth of her great-great-grandmother’s cornbread.

Similar to the white women of her time, Genevieve, Lizzy’s Native American great-great-grandmother, wore her long gray hair in a braid, which she piled onto her head like a woven basket or serpent. She was a tenant farmer and seller of eggs and other goods, while her husband practiced carpentry. She also ran a fiercely efficient household, leaving no room for waste. She was the only one allowed near her wood-burning stove and bubbling cauldrons of soup beans; still, in her austere life, she made room for magic, small touches here and there, such as the imprint of her delicate hand in the cornbread that she fed her family each day. No one could ever figure out how she had managed it, but Sharon had, and she would lord the secret over Lizzy until it drove her crazy, though not mental-institution crazy. Sharon liked to bribe Lizzy with secrets. It had always been a defining characteristic of their mother-daughter relationship, and also, an effective way to persuade strong-willed Lizzy to do the things that she disliked most.

“But I want to know now,” Lizzy said, pouting. She stomped the heel of her cowboy boot into the concrete floor, but Sharon held firm.

“I’ll tell you when you finish your dissertation,” she repeated, wrapping up the bread.
Lizzy continued to pout.

“What if I need to know how to make the handprint in order to finish my dissertation?” Lizzy crinkled her nose and raised her left eyebrow.


Joe, who had been relatively content smoking cigarettes, finally lost his cool. He slammed the screen door shut, turning to Lizzy and Sharon. “I’m tired of this sitting-around-shit,” he said. “Let’s get on with whatever it is we’re doing, and you better not pull any crazy shit this time, Liz.”

Lizzy fixed Joe with a scowl. He gave her one right back. If anyone was responsible for Baby Tyrant’s possession of the car, it was Joe. Though maybe it was Sharon’s fault, too.

When Baby Tyrant died, he was cremated, and Sharon picked up his ashes, then placed the small cardboard box of him—a modest, sleek box that looked like it could hold fine perfume or gloves or jewelry—into the glove compartment, where it, or rather he, remained for an entire year. It wasn’t clear to Lizzy, a child of eleven at the time, why her parents did not scatter Baby Tyrant’s ashes immediately, or why they didn’t, at the very least, place the box somewhere more stable and less transient than the car. Even in death, the family seemed to fear Baby Tyrant’s restless spirit. The further they could keep the box from their home, the better.

For the first few months that the box inhabited the car’s glove compartment, it stayed quiet, like a CD, or any other object without its own life or spirit. About five months in, however, Baby Tyrant, or the box, or whatever was inside, started to wake up.
At night, Lizzy ventured out to the car to visit Baby Tyrant because she missed him. One evening, as she sat in the passenger seat, peering into the open glove compartment, she heard the contents of the box begin to shake, not loudly, but, softly, like pepper in a pepper shaker—a little shake, shake, here, a little shake, shake there. She heard the sound, and though startled, never felt genuine fear. She figured a bug had gotten into the box, or that gravity or some other natural force of the universe, was conducting its invisible and necessary work. Six months in, however, the box stopped shaking and started dancing. That’s when Lizzy knew that Baby Tyrant, or whatever remained of him, had taken full demonic possession of the car. She routinely told the demon that she loved it but to settle down, or else. In response, the box danced harder and the car’s stereo began to turn off and on, unpredictably, as Sharon drove the vehicle to and from work.

A year after Baby Tyrant’s death and cremation, Joe scattered his father’s ashes in a respectful manner, on the farm, on a bright, sunny day, as Baby Tyrant had requested before he died. But it was a windy June day, the sort common to early summer in Kentucky, and as Joe threw Baby Tyrant’s ashes into the fragrant, humid air, the wind pushed the ashes back towards Joe and the rest of the family, covering them in bits of cremated bone, tumors, skin, and all the other lasting details of Baby Tyrant’s death. Joe wiped ashes from his mustache. Sharon spat them from her mouth. Lizzy shook them from her eyelashes and hair. The wind whistled through the grasses, thistles, and trees. It seemed to laugh at the family’s failed effort in the same way Baby Tyrant would have.

Though Baby Tyrant no longer occupied the Cadillac in any material form, Lizzy postulated that he continued to possess the car out of spite. A few months passed after
Sharon put Baby Tyrant’s ashes in the car, the Cadillac stalled on the interstate as Sharon drove to work.

“I am not driving that piece of junk ever again,” she said.

The next day, Joe promptly bought Sharon a Lexus, before driving Baby Tyrant’s Cadillac out to the far side of the farm, out to the large flat stretch, up on the hill, overlooking the Big Pond, where Joe planted tobacco before the buyout, and there it stood.

After Joe and Lizzy had quit glowering at one another, the Blacks made their way to the Cadillac and the field. They did so in Joe’s truck. The family drove past Joe’s empty tobacco barns and fields filled with black, grazing cattle.

“Look how fat they are,” Joe said. He couldn’t help himself.

Sharon and Lizzy kept silent, smirking at one another. The gravel path caused the truck to shake as they went, and the raw ground they encountered as they left the path, paved only by cow hooves, caused greater turbulence. Once at the top of the hill, Joe opened the gated area. He had gated the field off to keep his cattle from getting in, and the spatial effect was similar to that created by a small, country cemetery. At the field’s center, Lizzy observed Baby Tyrant’s Cadillac, which she had named Caddy as a child, and grinned.

_You bastard_, she said silently to Baby Tyrant, _we’re going to exorcise you this time. You can’t live in that car forever. You can’t live inside of me forever._

Lizzy didn’t actually think of her grandfather as a bastard. When Lizzy was six-years-old, Baby Tyrant, who was responsible for Lizzy on that day, had gotten drunk and
left his truck in drive at the farmhouse while he ran inside to vomit. When he came outside, the truck had vanished. It barreled down the hill towards Lizzy, who sat several hundred feet away, dangling her feet near Devil’s Creek, over a Scottish-style stone fence. The truck did not destroy Lizzy. Baby Tyrant screamed her name; she heard him and moved just in time. Yet, he had nearly killed her—on multiple occasions, though this was certainly the most glaring example of his neglect. He had also amused and inspired Lizzy to pursue a life of art, humor, and storytelling. Her feelings towards him, similar to the feelings of many children towards wayward relatives, were ambivalent. She simultaneously loved him and wanted to free her mind from the emotional trauma and mistrust of men his unpredictable presence had burned into her psyche.

Lizzy and her family disembarked from the truck and made their way to the car. Joe had cut a slender, serpentine path leading up to Caddy, which he kept clear through the seasons, both cold and hot, both barren and vegetative. They brought the beer along with them. When they came to the car, they stopped about three feet away. Lizzy noticed a new blemish on Caddy’s windshield. It seemed that a flung rock, lightning, or some other force of nature had created a small, spidery divot. Perhaps the natural world would exorcise Baby Tyrant from his terrestrial fortress whether he approved or not. Joe nodded Lizzy’s way.

“Lightning,” he confirmed.

Though the weather was warm, Sharon, whose body had been a thermo-regulatory mess since menopause, shivered. When Joe wasn’t around, she set the thermostat on ninety.

“Let’s get this over with and eat some cornbread,” Sharon said.
Joe cracked his beer open. Lizzy cracked hers. They both looked at Sharon. She cracked hers open, too.

“Cat piss,” she mouthed.

“Yummy, yummy cat piss,” Joe said.

They raised their cans and tapped them together.

“To Baby Tyrant,” Joe said.

Lizzy and Sharon echoed him. They all drank.

As Lizzy swallowed, she heard the insects chirping and spotted several buzzards circling over some poor, dead critter in the distance. The dark birds had long stopped circling over the car. Suddenly Lizzy, who saw an opportunity for personal mischief, decided to hijack the ceremony. She downed the rest of her beer, threw the can on the ground, and crushed it beneath her boot.

“Baby Tyrant,” she said, “if you’re in the car, I command you to leave now.”

“What the hell, Lizzy?” Joe said. Lizzy ran towards the car. Joe tried to stop her but couldn’t. She mounted the hood, stood upright, and began jumping up and down.

“Leave!” she screamed. “Leave!”

She looked into the sky and started laughing maniacally.

Sharon gazed on in mild amusement, while Joe ran towards the car, grabbed Lizzy by the leg and attempted to drag her down, unsure if this deranged outburst was perhaps the onset of the same troubles that had led to her institutionalization when she was a teenager.
She fell from the hood and continued to laugh. She laughed so hard that she cried. Sharon started to laugh as well. She couldn’t repress the urge, and Joe frowned at Lizzy, who was laughing and covered in grass, with consternation.

“What?” Lizzy said. “Can’t you take a joke?”

Joe glanced the hills around him, giving them a full panoramic sweep. He knew the neighbors were watching, and commenting upon, the spectacle of Lizzy’s outburst. They watched Joe all the time, and they especially watched the family on this day, the day of Baby Tyrant’s birth, when the family gathered around what appeared to be a piece of junk and began speaking to it.

Joe wasn’t off base. At a distance, the neighbors did observe the scene through their binoculars.

“She’s still crazy as shit,” Aunt May said to Carter. The pair stood on Aunt May’s porch, eating caramel candies. Harry the farm cat witnessed Lizzy’s wild display with his sharp, feline eyes and ran towards the scene. The Blacks had disturbed several mice nesting in the car’s underbelly, and Harry hoped to make them his dinner.

As Lizzy lay in the grass, with Joe standing over her, shaking his head, she wondered if the exorcism had worked. She had tried something different each year, but to no avail. Each time she returned to the car, she could still sense Baby Tyrant’s presence lurking inside. Several minutes passed after the attempted exorcism and Lizzy scrutinized the car to assess the results of her efforts. She peered into a place beyond visual experience, a space that she could feel, but not see.

“Damn it, he’s still there,” she said.

Joe shook his head and picked up another beer.
Sharon snorted and poured out the remnants of her beer in the grass.

Unbeknownst to the Blacks, Harry had found his way beneath the car and traveled up into its anatomy to stalk the startled mice that lived there. Successful in his hunt, he jumped out, and Lizzy, still on the ground, screeched.

Joe eyed his daughter with disdain. “That’s what you get,” he said in response to her screech. “That’s what you get for making such a damn ruckus year after year.”

That’s what Joe said, but secretly, he did wonder if the exorcism had been successful, and Sharon, who stood shivering on the outskirts of Lizzy’s hysteria and Joe’s disapproval, wondered the same thing.

Later that evening, after Sharon and Joe left, Lizzy cracked open a Budweiser and lowered her tired body onto the leather couch, where Baby Tyrant had done the majority of his sleeping—and snoring. Though Lizzy disliked the dirty-sock taste of beer, she appreciated the calm that settled in after a few cans. With her left hand, she traced the crude “L” she had carved into the leather couch cushion with her father’s pocketknife a decade prior. The shape was still there, tucked into the small leather depression where couch cushion and couch arm met. Baby Tyrant later told her he could never determine whether the “L,” which looked more like a “V” was the result of his granddaughter’s artistry or the branding of the dead beast’s hide. He never punished Lizzy, not for that incident.

Lizzy heard Devil’s Creek outside. As the creek moved, it made a low, gushing sound, like blood within veins. The sound filled her with an overwhelming urge to go down to the creek and stand in the exact spot where she had almost died. Lizzy yawned,
tapped her fingers on the metal coffee table, took another swig of beer, and stared into the empty TV. A shadowy reflection, her own reflection, appeared on the screen. She saluted the reflection with a brief toast, before rising to her feet. The sound of Devil’s Creek was so strong.

Lizzy put on an old pair of waders and ventured out into the night in pursuit of a ghost, the ghost of her own past. The summer night had grown cold. Lizzy contemplated putting on a sweater but felt more eager to make her way down to the creek, down the hill, to the exact place she had stood during the crash. She didn’t take the gravel path, but, instead, followed the grass path Baby Tyrant’s truck had blazed on the day of her near-death accident. Crickets infused the night air with their queer, wheezing music, and smaller bugs thickened the darkness with their constant fluttering. As she walked, Lizzy noted the unevenness of the ground beneath her feet. Occasionally, the toe of her cowboy boot got caught in a raised patch of mud or grass. A mosquito, no doubt nourished into existence by a slow, swampy stretch of Devil’s Creek, bit her on the neck. She swatted at the creature once and hard. It buzzed away in search of other blood-filled bodies.

When Lizzy reached the site of the crash, she stood on what remained of the crumbling, limestone fence and gazed up at the house, trying to remember who she had been at age six, what she had been thinking at the exact moment when a beast made of metal came hurtling toward her. Inside the farmhouse on the hill, her bedroom light was on, and she had the odd sensation that someone else lived in the house, that she was the stranger to this place, and that whoever sat in the house, with the lamp clicked on, was watching her. Perhaps it was the presence of the ghosts that she felt, not just that of Baby Tyrant, but of all of them. Lizzy pivoted on her heels to face Devil’s Creek. Cool air
emanated up from the waters. Creek willows and other trees, hard to make out in the
dark, shook when the wind touched them. When the wind grazed Lizzy’s cheek like the
finger of a ghost, she shook, too.

Though she could only see the ghosts in her mind’s eye, she speculated that they
constituted a species of being as taxonomically diverse as all the creatures that had ever
lived upon the earth. There were cat ghosts, cow ghosts, farmer ghosts, tenant farmer
ghosts, insect ghosts, the ghosts of gardens and slaves, of former cash crops, of Indians,
and of blue, still-born infants fresh from their pioneer mothers’ wombs. Some of them
lived in the house, and if not in the house, then in the layers of soil and limestone beneath
it, or at the bottom of the hill, or in the creek bed, where they mingled with the
groundwater and the bodies of the living people who drank it. The ghosts lived in Lizzy’s
imagination, taking up space. Even when she settled in a Midwestern city, a world far
from her homeplace, in a third-floor apartment, bordered by a lovely stand of walnut
trees, the ghosts came for her, and though she tried to shake the velvety dust of them
from her consciousness, they never stopped coming. Baby Tyrant was their ringleader. At
night, as she lay in her Midwestern bed, surrounded by her books and various doctoral
projects, covered in blankets and darkness, they cornered her, sometimes while she stared
at the ceiling, sometimes while she dreamed.

As Lizzy continued to watch Devil’s creek and think of ghosts, Harry, the orange
farm cat, jumped up on the fence where Lizzy stood and sidled up against her leg. She
shrieked for the second time that evening and jumped down into the wet, dew-covered
grass below. Harry, who expected a warmer reception, hissed once before prancing out
into the fields where many svelte mice lurked.
Pawpaws

It is mid-June in Iowa. The air is hot and flooded with moisture, and the garden that I put in a few weeks ago, a carefully laid out plot of tomatoes and basil, of kale and okra, of squash and curling, reaching, grasping, peas, has drowned in a putrid muck of soil that doesn’t drain. It isn’t the soil’s fault, I know, but the gardener’s. I’m still new to this place, to Iowa, and am only now being initiated into the ways of its lush, buckeye black soils. In Kentucky, the land I come from, cavernous limestone underworlds exist beneath well-percolated layers of clay-silt-loam. Each evening, the sun, when it passes below the hills, feels close. But the laws of nature I learned so well there do not apply here. And, as I stand on my back patio, looking down into a flowerpot teeming with a vibrant stand of papaya seedlings, I am left wondering, in a very earnest way, what the hell those laws could be.

Papayas are tropical plants with a tropical range, and, having spent the past winter in Iowa, a land of infinite sky and wind, I can attest, with mug-slamming emphasis, that this place is no Paraguay. Still, these plants, so far from home, continue to grow. At first, there were five, small things, I hardly noticed them, but now I would have to count every hair on my head to accurately document their proliferation.

Perhaps you’re wondering what strange and exotic bird journeyed forth from the equator to shit upon my Midwestern flowerpot. It wasn’t a bird at all, it turns out, but my boyfriend, Justin. Don’t worry, there wasn’t any defecation involved, just a man-child, the longtime partner of a woman-child, feeding his pet roly-poly, Randall, the remnants of a papaya.
When Justin eats fruit, the juice dribbles down his chin and neck and shirt. His massive brown eyes roll heavenwards. “Taste explosions,” he mutters in semi-coherent tones. We sit across from each other at a table created by the unification of two glorified TV trays. My eyes roll to the left. The papaya he eats isn’t ripe, and who knows how far it had to travel to reach his eager gullet—and at what great cost to the environment, and to people? I’m on my high horse, and, as usual, Justin knocks me down.

“Want a piece?” he asks, dangling a sliver of the sweet, salmon-colored flesh inches from my nose.

I seize the fruit between my teeth. As I devour this sweet, semi-ripe shred, visions of sunshine and alternate warm realities dance before me. Was the sensation worth it? Probably not. I can’t decide, except, actually I can, or I know that I should decide—to do what? Quit eating tropical fruit?

By the time Justin and I finish the papaya, only its caviar-like seeds remain. Justin gathers these seeds in his hand and sprinkles them into the large flowerpot where Randall the pill bug lives.

“Randall!” Justin calls, chirping and brushing his fingers against the leaves of our two Madagascan fire plants.

Within seconds, Randall, the heartiest pill bug I’ve ever seen, becomes visible, scurrying across his papaya seed-littered biome like a creature in ecstasy.

“He’s your spirit animal,” I whisper to Justin.

Justin isn’t pleased. “I’m a pill bug?” he asks.

“Maybe,” I say. “Look how much he likes the seeds.” We glance down at Randall and laugh.
“And what’s your spirit animal, then, a bunny rabbit?” Justin twitches his nose from side to side, the way I do sometimes, when mine itches.

“No,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I have a spirit plant. Duh.”

Anyone who knows anything about me knows how much I love plants. I love prairie grasses and dune grasses, maple trees and poplar trees, both angiosperms—the fruitful—and gymnosperms—the fruitless. I love plants because plants, like people, have secrets.

Take the tobacco plant, for instance, so valued for the stimulating nicotine of its broad, green leaves. In late summer, this six-foot-tall behemoth of the plant kingdom begins to sprout a course sucker called a “spike.” Most farmers cut this terminal shoot away upon first siting, as the plant begins to undergo significant metabolic and flavor-affecting changes in response to the spike’s appearance. But sometimes, weather, time, and the plants themselves do not cooperate. Sometimes, whole tobacco fields burst into bright yellow, pink, or white blooms before farmers can alter the plants’ natural course. Sometimes, the tobacco plant, against pretty great odds, still creates its own seeds.

Kentucky farmers don’t grow much tobacco anymore. After the vertical integration of the industry in 2004—the beginning of a new era that farmers in the region collectively call the buyout—growth of this native North American plant no longer turned a reliable profit. All over the Bluegrass, the rolling, south-central region of my state, black tobacco barns turned gray. In urban and semi-urban areas, bulldozers and teams of construction workers moved in to dismantle dilapidated sprawls of tobacco warehouses, making way for a new agricultural, and historical, present. Tobacco crops began to disappear, not only from the literal soil of my state, but also from the collective
imagination of its inhabitants. For so long, tobacco was king and queen. I don’t know what crop will take its place.

My father raises cattle, only cattle now. Some farmers raise corn. Many farmers would like to raise hemp, but irrational fears of increased marijuana usage keep the necessary legal framework at a remote temporal distance. Some farmers still try their luck at tobacco, but their hundred-year-old dance with the tall, broad-leafed crop is a losing game.

I visit home a few times a year. When I do, my father and I cruise across the Madison County countryside in his white Toyota pickup, ritually locating the few fields where the tobacco still grows.

“Look over there,” he says in his gruff, curmudgeonly grumble. “He should’ve topped it off earlier.” I shift my gaze to follow his voice. Rows and rows of yellow flowers bow and glow in the afternoon sun. As I register this rare sight, one of the many rocks that weighs down my consciousness begins to lift, and the small, wild things that live inside of me begin to scurry. I’ve always felt a hard-to-articulate kinship with the tobacco plant. In a deep, historical, even primordial, kind of way, I understand what it feels like to have my procreative energies subverted for purposes determined by men. I’ve never been molested or raped, yet I feel rage, deep in my woman’s body, for all the dead and living women who have been.

Sometimes, when I look out across those fields, I want more than flowers.

Sometimes I want pink, white, and yellow flames.
Though tobacco was my first plant love, I wouldn't call it my spirit plant. Spirit plants, much like spirit animals, are a hard thing to figure.

I sent Justin back to Kentucky a few weeks ago because I needed to do some thinking, or some writing, or some other elusive thing that I had intended to do, but won’t, because I can’t. I wanted to reclaim myself. I wanted to work on becoming happy again, whatever that means. What I’ve done instead is created a new and particularly lonely tier of hell with my name writ large all over it. Objects out of place unnerve me. Food, all food, tastes bland, like cement or little hunks of cardboard. The organic matter on my plate has mass and shape, sure, but the biological magic that linked me to my food is gone. The sun feels nice, but I could live without it. People are nice, but I could live without them, too. I sleep long hours and drink too much, searching, in every sensory experience, for a world of human pleasure that I know exists, that I remember exists, but that, for the life of me, I can no longer find.

It’s been four cold months since Randall enjoyed his papaya-seed feast beneath the blue-white glow of the grow light in my Iowa apartment. He hasn’t made an appearance for two months since, and I suspect, in a creeping, instinctual sort of way, that he’s dead. Randall was a robust fellow, a roly-poly in the prime of his arthropodal life. He was a crustacean. Despite what many Americans might think, Randall wasn’t a pest to plants at all, but a decomposer of their fallen, decaying parts. Seeing his small, segmented body scuttle around inside my grandmother’s flowerpot, filled me with joy. Whether or not Randall was actually a Ronda, matters little to me. I look and look into that flowerpot. No Randall in sight.
As I wait to become happy again, I pull up one of the small green seedlings growing in Randall’s pot by the roots and confirm that the plant in my hand is, indeed, a papaya seedling. The plant grows directly from one of the seeds that Justin tossed into the pot several months prior. Since that time, the hard, bark-like shell of the seed, once encapsulated in a purple layer of liquid, has opened, and the plant embryo inside has evolved into this life. As I bend closer to the blue flowerpot, I see white, almost glow-in-the-dark sprouts emerging from the potting soil at every conceivable angle. However disconnected I may be from typically shared understandings of human reality, I know that papaya plants should not be growing in Iowa, that they won’t live past September without some serious human intervention and a greenhouse, but I keep them anyway. I still enjoy watching things grow.

Over the next few months, I water the plants sparingly. The rains are heavy here. My garden drowns then drowns again. The kale goes first, then the peas. The deer and rabbits of Ames feast upon my tender sweet potato slips before they grow large enough to be called vines. I visit my garden daily, pile dark dirt high around the plants that remain in a last-ditch effort to save them from their imminent, waterlogged doom. My neighbors, who have a garden plot next to mine, have elected to raise their plants in pots and potting soil, rather than the soil. At first, I sneer at these pots. Real gardeners plant their crops in the ground, I think. But after a night of particularly forceful showers, I begin to look upon those terra-cotta watchtowers with envy. The waters move and swell around them; the pots stand steady, and those plants—an expansive bouquet of eggplants, squash,
tomatoes, basil, and other culinary bounties—stand erect, alive. My papaya plants, safe in their rather palatial pot, also remain alive. At least there is that.

In Kentucky, Justin views the pictures I send him of my plants, both the living and the dying, with interest. My picture-texts prompt a phone call in which I complain, in an endless and annoying way, about the moribund status of my garden. Justin laughs.

“This is your first time gardening in Iowa,” he says. “You’re much too hard on yourself.”

Justin tries to sound encouraging, but I can tell, from the gravelly raspiness of his voice, that he isn’t sleeping. His insomnia, a medical mystery that no doctor has ever taken seriously, became an established pattern when he was a senior in high school. Some nights, he sleeps five hours. Those are the good nights. Other nights, he sleeps as few as two hours. Some nights, not at all. When he doesn’t sleep, his heart races, jolting the purple, root-like veins of his body alive with the electricity of its excessive speed. I hope for his sake, and also for mine, that last night wasn’t one of those nights.

“Hey, Liz,” he says, “I can’t breathe. I’m gonna have to go now.”

My heart races. “What do you mean you can’t breathe? Are you having an anxiety attack?”

Justin and I both know that his medical insurance isn’t worth a bushel of soggy tomato plants, that if he goes to the emergency room, the doctors, well meaning though they may be, will stick him with a bill that he can’t afford to pay. My face tightens. What can I do? His parents aren’t going to help him; they think he’s too old to benefit from their financial support. I begin pacing around the apartment with the cellphone pressed against my ear. My insides feel staticky, like they’re full of bees instead of blood. The
two, tall snake plants, standing like sentries in front of the large living room windows, look alive in ways that their genetic code did not intend. My ear sweats, as I attempt to cipher the subtle language of Justin’s uneven breathing on the other line. I know I need to start talking about something, anything, to calm us both down. I walk out onto the back patio where the papaya plants grow. The air feels cool and good. My pulse slows.

“You know those papaya seeds that you fed Randall this winter?” I ask.

“Yeah?” Justin says. He doesn’t sound good.

“They’ve started to sprout.”

“What are you going to do with them?” he asks. “Will they survive? In Iowa?” He wheezes.

“I think I’m going to take them to one of the greenhouses on campus,” I say.

“Maybe someone will adopt them.” I’m attempting to make a small joke, here, but I don’t expect it to land. Justin, a naturally cheerful person, currently exists in a reality where humor doesn’t.

“That sounds good, Liz,” Justin says. “I have to go now.” He doesn’t sound great, but he sounds a little better than he did when I first called.

“Call me if you need anything,” I say. A lightning bolt strikes in the distance. For a second, all the plants and roads and skies and other surfaces that shouldn’t be seen by night become visible.

“I will,” Justin says. “Goodnight.”

With the phone dead in my hands, I stand on my back patio, thinking of Justin’s plight and grimacing.
Long after I’ve gone to sleep, in the ionized air of a summer storm, the papaya sprouts continue to live out their secret lives. In the darkness, I imagine that they exude vitality and health and something like hope. I wish I could be more like them. Is that a crazy wish? In my dreams, wild troops of fruit flies chase me from one corner of my apartment to the next. Perhaps living life as a human is the way to go after all.

I learn via some late-night Google searchers, all accompanied by massive hunks of dark chocolate, that the papaya has another name, a common name: the pawpaw. The papaya has the name of an old man, of a Kentucky grandfather. Attempting to attach that name to a fruit from a distant, tropical land disorients me. It’s a name I’ve known my whole life, not only as a term of kinship, but as the name of a plant native to Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and several other Eastern American states.

The pawpaw that I know yields a large, temperate fruit. Pale yellow-green and oblong, this North American native resembles a mango on the outside, but is entirely itself on the inside. In late August and early September, ripe clusters of the fruit jump from Kentucky trees with the urgency of paratroopers, thudding quietly against the damp ground. In piles of leaves, the pawpaws rest, as green, luminous, and vulnerable as caches of dinosaur eggs. If the raccoons and opossums could speak, they would say that the fruit tastes of custard and pineapple and banana with a chilled note of melon, deciduous forest fresh. They would say that such fruits exist to be eaten—immediately. Allow two days to pass, and the pawpaw will disintegrate into a puddle of purple-brown mush.

I encountered my first pawpaw tree at 4-H camp when I was eleven-years-old. A plant person from an early age, I had signed up for a forestry day-course to learn more
about the native Kentucky trees I had long worshipped. As our class—a ferociously excited group of ten and eleven-year-olds—stumbled and walked and ran along the dirt trail, our teacher and forest guide, Mike, came to a halt. He stationed himself near a small tree with large, droopy leaves.

“This is a pawpaw tree,” he said, taking one of the broad, light-green leaves in his right hand.

Why anyone would name a tree after grandfathers confused me. Mike continued speaking. “This tree produces the largest fruit native to North America,” he said. “Folks call it the Kentucky banana.”

Mike had my genuine interest now, as the prospect of encountering anything remotely banana-like within the context of my native landscape delighted me far more than it should have.

Over the next several years, as the era of tobacco came to a close, and as farmers’ markets became increasingly more common in my state, the pawpaw, a fruit I had never seen in the wild, started to make a more forceful appearance. I bought my first Kentucky bananas from the glittery-eyed owner of the Pawpaw Plantation when I was a senior in college. Whatever qualms I may have had with the name of this farmer’s establishment, I temporarily set them aside, so eager was I to steal a taste of this elusive fruit. The specimens for sale didn’t look too appetizing. The dark purple-brown bruises that marred the pale green skin of the puny fruits seemed to grow larger by the second.

The farmer spoke up. “They’re ripe,” he said. “They don’t transport well. Put ‘em in the fridge, and they’ll keep for a week.”
He winked at me, and my inner feminist bristled, but I bought five pawpaws anyway. They tasted mealy and rotten and were more seed than fruit. So much for my attempt to go native.

In the Kentucky State University laboratories of Frankfurt, Kentucky, researchers devoted to the pawpaw attempt to tame the genetics of this local fruit for massive North American consumption. They’ve had some success, thus far, but the fruit, far more delicate than its South and Central American relatives, resists the kind of domestication that the industrial agricultural system demands.

Centuries before European settlement of the United States, the native peoples of North America cultivated stands of papaws in the dark, moist soil of Eastern US creek sides and river valleys. For the few days that the ripe fruit rained down from the small, understory trees, native peoples enjoyed a sweetness rare to North America. Now, we Americans, the new natives, enjoy sweetmesses from across the globe year-round. As a member of that group, I give little thought to the displaced South American seeds that stand, wilting, in my Iowa flowerpot. I don’t have time, I say. I’m not happy, I say. I can’t sleep, I say. But their lives should matter. What is food, if not an extension of the self and its intention? What is the human spirit, if not a connection that links us to all other life? My spirit plant is the pawpaw, both the one in the pot, and the one of my place.
Green Worms and Other Displaced Things

At age twenty, I stand over the kitchen sink in my Lexington, Kentucky, apartment, peeling pale green worms away from broccoli florets by the dozens, as I savor the knowledge that the man I love no longer loves me. I don’t know why the leech-like attachment of these worms to the sweet green that succors them unsettles me, but it does. The worms’ bodies are far too soft and easy to kill with thumbs or the circling blades of a garbage disposal. I want to claim the worms’ broccoli for my life and my nourishment. Whatever digestive goodies this food might yield, I don’t plan to share with anyone, and especially not the worms.

My mother brought me the plastic bag of broccoli yesterday, hand-picked by my farming father who sent two text messages warning me about the worms:

Wormy.

 Might not be salvageable.

My father is a man of few words, electronic or otherwise, so I heeded his warnings with no grains of salt. For two days, the broccoli sat in my fridge, untouched, uncooked, and I thought the worms might meet their end in the cold, plastic-smelling air, but, alas, they not only managed to live through two moonless nights, but to nurse young, microscopic worms into fully visible health.

At the kitchen sink, I continue plucking them away, one by one, squirming body by squirming body, and placing them, like vegetable cuttings, in a Mason jar off to my right. They wriggle drunkenly against the curved glass, innocent of the things a human brain can know. (That these worms are the same ones that feed on cabbages, kale, Brussels sprouts, and other cool-growing greens, that they work their way up from the
bottom of the plant, gradually tunneling, mouths first, through the dense stems into tree-like worlds canopied in green, that some of them, who are not worms at all, but caterpillars, will morph into brown or grey moths, while others will become the white butterflies that seem to embody, in their delicate, fluttering grace, the truest spirit of windier summer days.)

Knowing what I know, I feel guilty, but I keep picking. I tell myself that I’m picking blackberries or some other living thing that doesn’t move. One tenacious fellow clings to my hand, which I shake, but the creature, dispossessed of his smooth, green home, won’t let go, so I stop shaking and start watching as he noses my palm—his whole body like a mouth, searching. I touch the top of the worm’s body. He feels velvety smooth, like the juice-filled capsules of a raspberry, or the tip of an erect penis—strange.

I, who have the habit of speaking, as my mother sometimes does, to living things that cannot respond, look down at the worm undulating in my hand. “Soft, so soft,” I whisper, “you could put a lover’s skin to shame.” As if prompted by my words, the worm marches out onto the ledge of my fingertip, arches his body in the air like a hose, front legs splayed, seeking some feethold in a world without a tangible up or down—before he tumbles, head over anus, into the Mason Jar of Doom, and begins to squirm, manically, alongside his fellows. Some worms in the jar are large; others are small; while others are microscopic and impossible to see. All the caterpillars are a pale, almost luminescent green, the same color of the human-cultivated broccoli stalks, and other greens, that they typically eat. Bereft of this food, the worms look lost. I poke a few florets into the Mason jar as a peace offering to my grumbling conscience: you can eat other things, it says. Your skin’s not even green, it comments further. If you had evolved to eat broccoli, your
skin would definitely be green. The worms mount the dulcet rubble of their mother ship and begin to munch with their shear-like mandibles, moving them side-to-side, side-to-side. I know that I will have to kill them, one way or another, sooner rather than later, and entertain a few possible methods.

In one scenario, I place the worms on my third-story deck, along with their meager supply of broccoli, and allow the wind and sun and rain and birds to reduce them to their constituent parts. In another scenario, I carry the jar down the street and deposit the worms in Woodland Park where the robins and cardinals and pre-lingual humans will, perhaps more quickly, reduce the worms to their constituent parts. Oddly, I never contemplate keeping the caterpillars as pets and nurturing them to their full, wind-worthy maturity. At twenty, I’m not there yet. So I entertain, what I believe to be, the most humane scenario yet: I will place the worms, in their jar, with their broccoli, in my freezer, and allow hypothermia to bestow the gift of a quiet, beak-free death. They’ll die doing exactly what they were born to do—eating!

But what will I do with the jar once the worms are dead? Will I continue to quaff water and Reunite, bobbing with pieces of ice, while sitting on my balcony, looking out at the walnut trees alive with hairy vines of poison ivy and yellow finches, or will I throw the jar into the garbage and forget that it ever existed, along with the worms? I look at the broccoli—so fresh and green and glistening with goodness. Perhaps broccoli is a magic potion that makes men fall in love with women they’ve recently stopped loving. Perhaps this broccoli will make me young and beautiful forever, and I won’t feel the need to wear makeup ever again. My skin will look so dewy and fresh that men—or, rather, a particular man—will be duped into thinking I’m ovulating every day of the week, month,
year. Like the Evil Queen in *Snow White*, I hold the jar between by eyes, as if with tongs, before fitting my hand around the glass. “Sorry guys,” I say, looking at the worms. Then I open the freezer and shove the bottle into a remote corner, alongside the lentils and freezer-burned pork chop. The food items look white, like tombstones. I shut the door, gently, and wait.

When I turn my back, the fridge makes odd, tinkling noises. “Do I need to make you an appointment with a urologist?” I ask, without turning around.


“That’s what I thought,” I say, leaving the fridge—and worms—alone.

During that time in my life, when I was working in the oral history department of a large land grant university, getting jilted, and freezing worms, I wrote a story in my head that went like this:

A young man falls in love with a young woman. He meets her in a philosophy class, centered around the topic of death and dying. He loves her because she’s articulate and unafraid of death. “We all go back to the earth,” she says. He loves her because of the way her eyes darken when she’s about to say something that is, by his standards, profound. He loves the way she dresses herself, always in black, but thinks it’s strange that she never shows her arms, or legs, though he imagines that they are the same color as her neck: a little golden, a little olive. She could tan if she wanted to, but, for whatever reason, has decided to embrace—what—sunscreen? The great indoors? Vampirism? It’s odd the way she keeps her arms covered all the time. She seems particularly adamant about this. Whenever she raises her hand in class, and her sleeve becomes loose around
her wrist, she immediately moves a hand to pull it up in the same way a man in work boots might rectify a drooping sock. Sometimes, when she talks about death, her eyes sparkle.

Her name is Marsha. His name is David. Marsha doesn’t yet realize that David exists. When Marsha speaks, the air whistles softly, like wind, through her teeth. Her teeth aren’t perfect. When she smiles for the first time, David notes the sizable gap between her front teeth. A few months later, as he sits on the lumpy brown sofa in her economy-style apartment, he’ll learn that she chose to keep the gap, against the better judgment of orthodontists and her parents. He’ll learn exactly what kind of woman Marsha Thomas is.

As David sits on the sofa, munching on popcorn dipped in hummus, Marsha walks towards the closet that houses her trashcan to pitch a dead insect she found on the coffee table. It looks like a ladybug, except orange. Marsha holds the bug in her hand a few minutes, before opening the door of the closet and tossing the dry carcass into the bin. As she opens the door, she hardly allows a sliver of light to pass into the closet’s interior. The door opens a bit too widely, it appears, and Marsha closes it, the same way she pulls up her loose shirt sleeves in class—with haste. David knows that Marsha can feel him watching her.

“Marsha,” he says from the couch, “why don’t you want me to see what’s in your closet?” He knows she’s a perfectionist, an A student all the way. Perhaps the closet isn’t as tidy as she’d like? To his astonishment, Marsha puts her head in her hands and begins to cry. Ringed in viscous snot, her shirtsleeves droop. Yanking at her sleeves, Marsha
tucks her head between her shoulders and cries harder. After several seconds, she wipes her eyes and looks up at David. He feels bewildered.

“Here,” she says angrily, slinging the door back on its hinges.

“No!” David yells, but it’s too late. A tidal wave of blue willow plates, Chinese-style teacups, forks, spoons, knives, thimbles, a quilt, a dissection kit, two bibles, and a powder horn crash against Marsha, knocking her to the floor. David rises from the couch. Could his eyes be deceiving him?

“Are you all right?” he asks, freeing Marsha from a serving platter that he hadn’t noticed when the wave first fell.

She buries her face in her hands. “I can’t make it stop,” she sobs.

“What do you mean?” David asks, grasping her shoulder.

“My inheritance,” she says, shaking her head. “It won’t stop coming out.”

“Out of where? The closet?” David kneels down beside Marsha. He feels disoriented. He doesn’t know what she means by this inheritance business. Marsha grips David’s face with her hands, and her eyes sparkle.

“No,” she says, releasing his chin and pulling back her sleeves. “From here.”

Marsha reveals two gaping holes that open and close on her wrists like mouths. They are bloodless and infinitely deep. They are pale purple and bruised-looking around the edges. David tries to move, but can’t. Tries to speak, but can’t. Marsha looks straight at him. The pupils and irises of her eyes are indistinguishable. Tears continue to drip down her face, along with snot from her nose, so she must still be human. She pulls her sleeves back down, obscuring the mouths. “Now you know,” she says, looking down at the floor.
David touches her face with his hands. Her skin feels cool, like limestone. He tilts her chin, gently up and looks into her eyes.

“What do I know?” he asks, earnest and wide-eyed.

“You know my secret. I’m like a human volcano of anthropic junk.”

“But what does that mean? How did this happen to you?”

“I’m an only child and an only grandchild,” Marsha begins. “I’ve inherited so much junk from my ancestors. Pottery and silverware and books and tapes and music and stories and names. I can’t keep track of it all anymore. A few years ago, I started to feel an odd build up of pressure behind my skin. The pressure started in my fingertips as a tingling sensation. I thought I had carpal tunnel syndrome. I write a lot of papers for school, do a lot of typing at work. It seemed like a fair assessment of my condition. But, over time, the strange pressure crept into my arms and face. Each morning, when I awoke, I found it difficult to move from my bed. I felt like a moving china cabinet, like a piece of furniture rather than a human being. I tried some acupuncture with needles, which relieved the pressure some, not enough.

“About a year ago, I got out a butcher knife and made the holes I showed you. They never grew back. An unbelievable amount of junk came spewing out of me. It looked like all the stuff my grandmother back home gave to Goodwill after my grandfather passed. I thought the world was ending. I thought I was ending. And then I felt better. So much better.”

Marsha laughs and smiles at David, who tries to hide his horror.

This woman needs help, he thinks, but where in the world will she find it? And who will believe her?
He believes her.

He picks up her hand, which, like the rest of her, feels limp and cool.

“Why don’t we get you something to eat?” David asks. “You’ve lost a lot, it seems.” David eyes the pile of rubbish lying on the floor, then returns his gaze to Marsha who has the look of someone who’s seen light for the first time after living ten years at the bottom of a well. Her eyes glow like coals.

“Where do you want to go?” he asks.

“How about Waffle House?” Marsha says, wiping snot from her face with her free hand.

David squeezes Marsha’s other hand.

“Waffle House, it is,” he says, pulling her up from the ground.

Marsha stands and dusts herself off. Particles of pottery-shard dust cling to her black clothing. David looks at the mess around them. “We can clean this all up when we get back,” he says. Remembering that all the mess came from Marsha’s body, he pauses.

“What do you want us to do with all of this?” he asks.

“Maybe take it to Goodwill,” she says, hopeful. “Maybe someone could use it?” She shrugs her shoulders and grabs her purse, which sits on the kitchen counter.


Five years later, I still haven’t decided how the story ends. In one version, David comes by Marsha’s apartment one day, about a month after the incident mentioned above, and knocks on the door. He hears a host of voices and clattering that turn to hushed whispers, that then become the barely audible rustling sounds of wind licking at
the edges of paper or leaves. Several pieces of mail, and a Virginia creeper vine, snake out from the base of the closed door. No one answers. The air that surrounds David weighs upon his body with a heaviness that he’s never felt before, and the story ends.

In a second version, everything begins exactly as it did in the first, but one thing changes, making all other things possible: When Marsha doesn’t answer the door, David kicks the door with all his strength. Though splintered, the wood doesn’t give the first time, so David gives it another kick and meets with success. Through the splintered wood, he sees an apartment awash in stuff—and also, in people. Two men in stovepipe hats sit at a table playing checkers. In a far corner, a gaunt woman, with her wilted breasts tucked into her waistband, churns milk into butter. A group of five children frolic amidst the junk, breaking dishes and small figurines one, after another, after another. Marsha is nowhere in sight. Trying to keep his footing, David walks towards the men playing checkers. He clears his throat. The men, both mustached, look up at him with irritation in their eyes. “Have you seen Marsha?” he asks, fixing them with a cold gaze. They tilt their heads towards the open bedroom door in a noncommittal way, before resuming their game.

Marsha lies facedown on the floor in a fluttering pile of tea-colored papers. The window is open, and wind moves over her hair. She might be dead, something David isn’t prepared for. He strokes her hair, and to his delight, Marsha’s body moves. “The ancestors came to visit today,” she says like a person waking from a bad night’s sleep.

“Through your wrists?” David asks, still stroking her hair.

“Yes,” she groans.

“How do we get them to leave?” he asks.
“Take me home,” she says, raising a flaccid hand in the air. David grabs it, squeezes hard.

“To your parents’ house?” he asks.

“No, no.” She shakes her head against the ground. “Take me to my ancestral home. Take me to my grandmother’s house.”

As the story ends, Marsha returns to her grandmother’s home in the Kentucky countryside, a two-hundred-year-old log cabin, where she becomes a complete person again. She may or may not be pregnant with David’s child. I haven’t decided yet, but the wrist holes heal, and her eyes start to sparkle when she talks about life.

As I pace around my apartment, imagining this story, the worms’ bodies begin to slow down in the freezer. One brave worm, perhaps the same one who walked out onto the tip of my finger earlier in the evening, walks out onto the precipice of a broccoli peak, body reared back like that of a horse, and freezes. The majority of the caterpillars die nestled against the broccoli, munching away, just as had I expected they would. A few sad fellows die at the bottom of the jar, food-less and without dignity. I still haven’t touched the broccoli.

At midnight, I pull the jar from the freezer to witness my crime. The glass is frosted with condensation wrested from the bodies of the worms and the broccoli. When I hold the jar up to the florescent light, it looks like a snow globe fashioned by elves or some other, less civil, spirits of the woods. I turn the glass around in my hands. Nothing lurches. Nothing falls. Nothing moves. I continue to house the jar in my freezer for several days afterwards. I have no idea why. After a week, I dump the green contents of
the jar into the foliage behind my apartment complex. I step back inside and run some water into the jar, swish the dirty liquid around like toothpaste water in a mouth. I do this many, many times: rinse and repeat, rinse and repeat. Rinse and repeat and repeat and repeat. I start to sweat because I know I’m falling into one of the many traps that my brain sets for me. That jar is contaminated with death. If I drink from the jar of death, will I die? I place the jar in the dishwasher for a final cleansing and suppress the thought.

You’re done with that kind of OCD craziness, I tell my brain, but it doesn’t listen. No matter how many times I wash the jar, it will never, ever feel clean to me. One day, I’ll tip the glass back against my lips and taste worms instead of water.

But that day never comes. I drink water and wine and fruit juices from the glass, but never worms or death or any of the other things I fear. That doesn’t mean I’ve stopped thinking about the worms. Their death haunts that jar for a reason.

On a visit home, to my family’s farm, I watch the white butterflies coasting on the air near the creek side. The kale and cabbage and broccoli in my father’s garden are done living, but the worms and humans that fed upon them are not. I go on a long walk, down a gravel path at my maternal grandmother’s house, which stands a short distance from my parents’ farm. I find my family cemetery, a pile of fallen limestone slabs, and sit on the cooling ground. Cattle graze on the grass around me, and their munching sounds oceanic. We’re home. All of us are home.

As for the man, the one I fell in love with, I want to keep him walking around the periphery of the story, in another state, where he belongs.
Lizzy’s Dream

I didn’t know why I found myself on a tropical island, but I did, and my grandfather was there, too. It had been about a decade since I’d seen him—eleven years, maybe more. Though I had no idea where I was, I could hear the mysterious boom-fizz of the ocean as it swelled and raked against the sand, and I could smell the heat that emanated from the shore’s substrata—the briny tang of dead things: water-logged sea kelp, mollusks, a whole prehistoric village, perhaps—rising. I could see Baby Tyrant in the distance as he walked towards me, and I walked towards him. This is a dream, I told myself, because it so obviously was. But a silent thrill rippled through me all the same as I took one step, then another, closer to a man I both hated and loved. I had long decided that the space between hate and love is a space of rapture, unsettled sounds moving through broken glass or a thousand grains of sand.

The sky above me was clear, blue, and every few seconds a hidden bird made a startled sound. Each sound was a color that had no name. A high-frequency sound. Neon-green sound—no, no, no, not quite. From what I could see, Baby Tyrant looked the same as he always had—thin gray hair sleeked back in a pony-tail, red Ralph Lauren polo with khaki shorts, skin the color of the insides of a cigarette. And there was a real cigarette, a Winston no doubt, pressed against his lips. I rolled my eyes because clearly he hadn’t learned a thing.

I also smiled because—clearly—he hadn’t learned a thing.

When he exhaled, the smoke took on unexpected forms: cacti, giraffes, refrigerators, tractors—a fern frond? I knew he was trying to show off, to amuse me in the same way he had when I was a child, but I had never liked cigarettes, and I couldn’t
understand why smokers should be granted any kind of special artistic license in my dreams, and especially this one. He had, after all, died, in part, from lung cancer.

I squinted against the sun. Baby Tyrant and I were within shouting distance now, but he didn’t shout, so neither did I. He put out his cigarette. No more smoke animals or appliances. A courtesy gesture? I took a deep breath and noticed he was grinning in that same way he always had, like a wise fool gone to seed. If he didn’t stop, I knew I would punch him. I both loved and hated the man for reasons that were, and still are, hard to articulate. Baby Tyrant was my grandfather, a man who had revealed parts of the world to me that I couldn’t see on my own: “Come look at this sunset, kid. Come look at this tree, kid. Come look at this building, kid.” At the same time, he was not my grandfather. He drank all the time and had nearly killed me as a child. He also had a mistress on the side that he visited at regular intervals. When my grandmother found out, she went a little crazy. So we had cut him loose, pretended not to watch as he floated off like an abandoned kite, right into a power line.

Baby Tyrant died alone burnt up from the inside out—lungs full of cancer, veins full of whisky, head full of dreaming, big ocean-sized dreaming, the kind that couldn’t stop. I couldn’t look at his body during the funeral, though I did hold his hand, which was clammy and full of strange smells—tangy, briny, secret smells.

As I continued to walk along the beach, my skin began to burn. My back was protected by my hair, which had always been long and dark, but my neck, arms, and legs were exposed, burnt. This had better be good, I thought, as my emotional pendulum swung decidedly away from love and towards hate. Perhaps hate was too strong a word for what I felt. Perhaps basic human irritation was a more accurate one.
A minute more and Baby Tyrant was within “talking” distance. Twenty seconds passed, and he stood before me, stinking like a pool hall. When he belched, the air between us smelled like a beer. He still grinned, almost maniacally, and I still wanted to punch him, hug him, punch-hug him.

“How’s it going, kiddo?” Baby Tyrant said. At the word “kiddo,” my heart jumped, but I wasn’t going to be won over so easily. “Heard you graduated from college last year,” he continued. “The University of Kentucky. Big Blue Nation. What about that?”

I crossed my arms and hardened my eyes. “You’re supposed to be dead,” I said. “You’re not supposed to bother me anymore, and especially not in my dreams. There are plenty of men I’d like to be dreaming of—and you, Baby Tyrant, are not one of them.”

Baby Tyrant shrugged his shoulders and laughed a short, dry laugh. “Shit, kid.” he said. “Take it easy. It was all a joke—the cancer, the coffin, all of it. Didn’t anyone ever teach you how to take a joke? And since when did you start dreaming of men? Shit.” He shook his head, clicked his teeth—what was left of them—and lifted a pack of Winston’s from his shirt pocket, along with a lighter.

When he lit up, he drew in deep and closed his eyes.

My saliva felt poisonous. It was just like him to strut around like a human smoke-stack, belching noxious fumes into the air, mocking his own death, making it into something barely worthy of recognition, making it into a joke.

“Death is not a joke,” I said, looking into eyes that were similar to mine. And I wanted to say a lot of other things too like, You were all alone when you died, face down in a puddle of your own bile, and you think this is funny? You think this is a fucking joke?
But I didn’t. I just stood there, letting my eyes rage for me.

That’s when Baby Tyrant released an extraordinary puff of smoke into the air. It assumed the shape of an umbrella, and, somehow retaining this shape, hardened into a real umbrella that floated down from the air like a dandelion seed, its plastic handle solidifying in my hand.

“You look like you’ve got a sunburn there, Liz,” Baby Tyrant said. “You’ve got the same skin as your father and me. Tissue paper. Terrible stuff. There’s a nice parasol for you. It should keep you out of danger until we get back to the resort.”

He leaned back on his heels and sucked in another drag. His eyes had that warmly belligerent glow of a local drunk or philosopher. Both? After all these years spent remembering them, I still couldn’t decide.

Baby Tyrant opened his eyes as the shade of the umbrella fell over me like a tree canopy. I didn’t want to smile, but couldn’t help it; it was happening. Baby Tyrant’s timing was, as it always had been, impeccable. He had caught me smiling my big smile, which, of course, had had the effect of making me smile even more. That’s the way emotional nuclear fission works. One atom splits, and all the other billions of atoms that come after it have no choice but to follow. But maybe that’s not how it works at all. Maybe I should gain some self-control. I watched the wind whip hard through the palm trees. Smells from the inland—coconuts, tropical flowers, cooking meat—began to overpower the dark ocean smells, to make promises of future happiness that I found hard to resist. In that moment, the island felt like an extension of Baby Tyrant, of his will, and perhaps it was.
Baby Tyrant took my hand. His skin, even on the palm, felt dry and cracked. He rarely held my hand as a child, and I was puzzled as to why he did so then, like the act was natural, like it was nothing. I suppose this is what I had wanted at the time—really wanted—not my private rage, whatever that means, but reconciliation, negotiated in a quiet place that my conscious self could not reach. “Your grandmother is back at the resort,” he said. “We’re having a party.” His eyes seared into mine with a reluctant tenderness. He knew what I also knew, that I could never forgive any man who gave me his love too easily, not even my own grandfather. His plea for forgiveness was quiet, all in the eyes, nothing in the voice, just the way I liked it. Just the way all the men I had ever loved had taught me to like it.

“What kind of party?” I asked. I used my “everything is normal” voice, a voice I had developed earlier than most children, the voice I had used to smooth the rough edges of the white-hot silences produced by all the silent, brooding men in my family. As an adult, I wondered if Baby Tyrant would understand what I was doing, if he would understand that I was trying to be genuine, even as the slight quake in my voice betrayed disinterest and latent irritation. As an adult, I had started to wonder about a lot of things. Humans were strange creatures, and the things they said and thought often didn’t match. The things I said and felt often didn’t match. In my free hand, I twirled the umbrella. The shade that it provided felt good on my skin, but it was late afternoon; the sun was setting, night was coming. Soon I would have contempt for its weight.

Baby Tyrant looked at me. “Oh, nothing big,” he finally answered in response to my question. “Just a three-person party. I was thinking we could go on a drive later. High in the mountains, you can hear the jungle at night. There’s nothing like it. Figured we
could have a few cocktails and take a drive up there in my convertible. It’s nothing fancy, but it might make your visit worthwhile.” He still held my hand.

“That sounds like a fun party,” I replied, not knowing quite what I should think of his suggestion that we drink then drive through MOUNTAINS. When I looked up I saw that the sky overhead had darkened, had become deep blue, almost black. I could see a boardwalk in the distance lit by tiki torches. “I don’t think I need this umbrella anymore,” I said, turning to Baby Tyrant, laughing at the obvious darkness.

“Just stay still a sec,” he said. We came to halt, and he stared hard at my umbrella. I wasn’t looking at it, but knew what was happening because I could smell the cigarette smoke in the air around me. Baby Tyrant opened his mouth wide and sucked the smoke back into his lungs. The amount of smoke he took in was immense. His eyes watered. He looked ill. I wanted to tell him to stop, which is when the coughing began, the most horrific coughing fit I’d ever heard. It sounded like he was choking; it sounded like he was dying. He couldn’t stop.

“Baby Tyrant,” I said, patting him hard on the back. “Baby Tyrant, are you going to be okay?” I didn’t know anything about first-aid then, and still don’t. To my relief, a healthy pocket of space developed between coughs, and Baby Tyrant, by increments, recovered. “You didn’t have to do that,” I said. My jaw clenched, and I knew I was going to let him have it. “There was no need to show off. You could have just told me to carry the damn thing. Why didn’t you do that?”

Baby Tyrant shrugged his shoulders; he looked weary. “Let’s just get back to the resort, kid,” he said, and I backed down, though I still wondered why he had to go and do
that, why he couldn’t be normal and act like a grandfather instead of an unpredictable trickster king.

At the resort there was a bar right off the boardwalk decked out with tiki torches, “tribal” masks, and other “island” regalia. A short woman worked behind the counter. She was about forty with blond hair, blow dryer-poofed, and her very own mask—the Maybelline kind. Something about her seemed unreal. Something about the whole place seemed unreal. She fit into the setting perfectly.

Another woman sat at the bar. Peering into a gold mirror, she lined her lips. I watched as she reached inside her purse, pulled out a tube of red lipstick and began to apply it, gently, gently, dabbing, dabbing. Her makeup dexterity mesmerized me, and though she didn’t immediately strike me as familiar, the way she applied her makeup did. Then I got it. This woman was my grandmother from about ten years prior. After my young grandmother blotted her lips on a cocktail napkin, she looked up, gave Baby Tyrant and me a quick wave, then smiled. Her hair was still long—and dark, similar to mine. She hadn’t yet decided to cut it. She hadn’t decided to get a facelift either, and I could see how the faint lines around her eyes and mouth suited her. Ironically, she looked more real, here, than she did in life.

“Look who I found wandering the beach,” Baby Tyrant said and pushed me forward.

My grandmother grabbed me by the wrists and held out her cheek for a peck. Her skin—thick, doughy, and covered in very fine, white fuzz—was a pleasure to touch. She smelled like red wine and French perfume—Chanel 05? It wasn’t anything I would wear;
it smelled too old-ladyish, a little too baby-powderish, a hint too fecal—a hint too rich? But my grandmother had been made for the finer things in life. Ornate Hermes scarves cascaded over her shoulders as naturally as hair, and I could see that she was wearing one now. It was jungle-colored—amidst the dense foliage sat several small monkeys, playing cymbals. I knew she had probably found them charming.

“Dear,” she said, holding me by the shoulders. “Let me see you. Let me see what you’re wearing. You layer things so nicely. No matchy-matchy with you.” She lifted my gauzy cover-up and examined my bikini.

“Is that the Lily-Pulitzer we got on sale last spring?” she asked. She never looked up. She was taking in the pattern, which struck me as funny because I hadn’t given the suite a thought the whole time I’d been dreaming.

I answered honestly. “I’ve never seen this swimsuit in my life.”

She looked skeptical, if not slightly offended. I’d always been known as a smartass, a tendency that my grandmother derided and that my grandfather encouraged. But this time, she let it go. “Why don’t you order a drink, dear?” she said, patting the seat next to hers. “But nothing too strong,” she added. “You’re so delightfully slender. We better get you home in one piece.” Before I had given any thought to a drink preference, she ordered one for me. “She’ll have one of those—oh, what’s it called?” She lowered her eyes and placed her hand on her forehead, thinking.

“A Bahama Mama?” the bartender offered.

“Yes, yes,” my grandmother said, sounding like Auntie Mame. “Oh, this is Bernice, by the way,” she said, pointing at the bartender, and this is my granddaughter,” she said, pointing back to me. Bernice winked. Her eyes were clear and blue, like the sky
from earlier in the day. There was something strange about her. I wanted to trust her but couldn’t. What did she want from my grandparents? What did she want from me? Even though it was my own damn dream, I still couldn’t say. I looked at her for a few seconds too long, wondering if she was Marsha in disguise. I was sure she had noticed my look, though she went on tending the bar.

When I glanced at my grandmother, I noticed the multiple martini glasses lined up next to her. I thought she had seemed a little buoyant, a little expansive, and now I understood why. She was loaded. “And I’ll have a Manhattan with a twist,” she screeched at Bernice, standing up a little too quickly in her barstool before slumping back down.

“Why don’t you take it easy?” I said, patting her shoulder. Baby Tyrant sat down on the stool next to mine and slugged down a beer. It was a Budweiser, of course, the one that had been waiting for him when we got back. I turned to him. Even though this was a dream, I thought I would pose the question anyway.

“How long have you been on this island?” I asked.

He reached for a cigarette, became agitated. “Bernice,” he called across the counter. “I’ve lost my light. Got one?”

I watched the looks that past between them. There was warmth there, but perhaps no more than that typically found between an alcoholic and his favorite bartender.

“Sure,” Bernice said, flinging a set of matches his way, winking at him. It was clear that they were old pals, that Baby Tyrant had been here awhile. He had had many such pals in his former life. One at Applebee’s. One at O’Charley’s. One at Outback. There had probably been more. Most of them had been middle-aged women, pretty, all of
them lovers of children. They had made me Shirley Temples and smiled as I watched my feet dangle down from the barstool.

“What was that?” he asked. “Sorry, lost my damn light.”

“Oh, nothing. Don’t worry about,” I said. He looked tired, and I felt a little tired myself. I wasn’t in any mood to dredge up the past. All a little ironic, given my sleeping state. I wondered if the irony would be wasted on him. If I told him that I was dreaming him all up, would he laugh—or disappear?

Bernice sat the Bahama Mama down on a napkin in front of me.

“Here you go, honey.”

“Thanks,” I said, and she smiled generously, before finding her way back to her own martini glass.

The drink that sat before me was a sugar addict’s dream. I had been trying to cut out sugar, even natural juices, but decided this was a special occasion, one taking place outside of reality, so perhaps it wouldn’t hurt me to indulge? Baby Tyrant struck a match. The sound satisfied me, and so did the smell of tobacco, and alcohol. The dimness of the room also satisfied me. Really, the whole unreal aura of the place satisfied me. I took a sip of my pink sugar drink. It tasted nice, so nice, like paradise. And I hadn’t tasted sugar in several days. I remembered my pledge to stay sober, to be the adult, but instead, I drank the whole damn thing in a few fell gulps. Glug. Glug. Glug. I wanted another, but I wouldn’t ask for one. This girl was a lightweight, and this girl was out!

I slammed down my glass.

Baby Tyrant slammed down his bottle.
My grandmother ting-ting-tinged the side of her martini glass with a plastic toothpick. This didn’t work well, but it almost had the intended effect. We all knew it was time to get moving, to take that trip up the side the mountain—several mountains. The air around us was large-moleculed and heavy. The insects chirped. Black crickets hopped across the damp planks of the barroom floor. I heard bird sounds in the distance, the same ones I had heard earlier in the day. Colors without names. Feathered bodies crowning the earth with sounds that were new to me, old to them. Behind the bar, Bernice received a text message—I heard the telltale buzz of her phone. She giggled. I stood up. Something didn’t feel right. I didn’t feel right. I felt like I couldn’t stand the feeling of my own skin, like everything around me was unreal or too real. What I really felt, I realized after the fact, was the dream getting scary. Baby Tyrant jangled his keys in front of my face.

“You ready to go, kid?” he asked. I tried to make out the emblem on the keys but couldn’t. “I think you’ll really like it up there,” he added, raising his chin towards the dark sprawl of mountains above. “There are all of these vines and roads with overlapping canopies.”


“Me too!” my grandmother said, and I helped her up from the barstool. She wobbled a little, but I remembered that she had never been nimble on her feet. She had hips that, for whatever reason, had been continually throwing her out of orbit. I wondered when this had started for her. Early twenties? Mid-twenties? I hoped not. I had noticed my own hips doing something similar. They had simultaneously become ripe for child-bearing and dangerous for walking.
Fortunately for my grandmother and me, she stayed on her side of the sidewalk—mostly—and I stayed on mine. Baby Tyrant walked ahead of us. When I saw the car, I wasn’t surprised. It was a red Miata, of course, the dinkiest of the dinkies, and guess who was going to end up sitting in the backseat as it scaled the side of a mountain—multiple mountains? Me, of course, because this is how nightmares work. Even though I felt somewhat tipsy in the dream and seemed to be suffering from a dissociative episode of sorts, my skin still prickled at the thought. The air felt cold. All the trees that lined the parking lot seemed to harbor their own heavy coolness, and this coolness surged up around me like the walls of an above-ground tomb. My stomach turned.

My grandmother and Baby Tyrant sat in the front seat, ready to go. When Baby Tyrant revved the engine of his tinker toy, my grandmother laughed, almost girlishly, like a woman who still had an interest in men and their toys. I swayed from side to side, but found my way into the back seat. Did Miata’s even have backseats? I couldn’t remember. It didn’t matter. I occupied the crawl space behind my grandparents like a good little girl should and watched in horror as they mixed cocktails, poured the mixture into long-stemmed glasses, turned toward the backseat, and made a toast to me.

“This is going to be fun,” my grandmother said, licking some of the drink’s stray sweetness from her lips. Her eyes flashed darkly.

Baby Tyrant didn’t say anything. He put the car in gear and drove. I bowed my head between my legs. Anyone—any non-inebriated and sane adult—would have been able to see that I was ill, to understand that what I needed most in that moment was to lie down in a dark place and rest, but Baby Tyrant kept driving. I could feel the land begin to move beneath us, to become steep, to change. Hidden birds squawked out the colors of
hell—red, red, red, yellow, yellow, yellow, fear, fear, fear! I smelled the car exhaust and the smoke from Baby Tyrant’s cigarette as they mixed with the night air, which was cold, but heavy, perhaps not so much with cold as with a peculiar darkness, the kind that can’t be found in parts of the world overpopulated by humans and their artificial lighting systems, which is to say, the kind that couldn’t be found anywhere on earth. What sort of dream island was this? What was this place that my mind had so colorfully coughed up?

In the backseat of the red Miata, my stomach lurch like a displaced sea cucumber—cold, gooey, living, yet alien. It slipped around—slip, slip, slip—on my abdominal floor. It belonged in the ocean, not in there, in me. The land rose, rose, rose. My head hung limp between my legs, sweating, even though my body felt cold. I couldn’t see anything around us. I wanted to see something around us, but if I sat up, I knew I would vomit. I was not only slightly drunk, but suffering from an intense bout of motion sickness. Up front, my grandmother prattled on about some purchase she hoped to make—a new set of cutlery from Williams and Sonoma, a Worth sweater, cashmere, a baby grand piano, jet-black. The list sounded endless, momentous. Baby Tyrant humored her, though I knew he detested spending money on all things—except sports cars and good whiskey, Kentucky bourbon whiskey. All the while, they continued to drink. I knew because I could hear the cold clinking of their glasses. Clink…clink. Suddenly, the hard gravel of the road gave way to a new surface. I didn’t know what was beneath us—something smooth that caught slightly under the wheels. We had come to a crawl, almost to a halt. Baby Tyrant put down his glass and grabbed the back of his seat. He turned towards me, and I know what I must have looked like: a lank pile of shivery legs and upside down hair.
“You all right there, kid?” he said, and then, “You’re going to want to brace yourself for this next part. You’re going to want to sit up straight. No more pussy-footing around on this trip, kid. It’s time for the real mountain—the real ascent.”

My grandmother looked at me, too—like she was amused. She threw back the rest of her martini and belched, then grabbed my face, studying me. I realized for the first time just how sharp and red her nails were.

“Would you be opposed to getting cheek implants?” she asked. “You have such a lovely face, but those would really set the rest of your features off. You would look like that model. The Russian one. I can never remember her name.”

Her nails sank into my skin, and I felt the soft tissue begin to tear. I screamed, but she wouldn’t let go. Her nails dug deeper, deeper, but she only smiled. My eyes widened. Her teeth were conical and sharp on the ends, like a vampire’s, but worse.

“What are you looking at?” she demanded, still grinning. “That’s what they do to your teeth when you get veneers. Didn’t you know?”

No, I did not know. I started to cry. I started to sob. I knew I had decided to follow this dream wherever it would take me, but I hadn’t been ready for this. I wanted out. I wanted to wake up in my bed, unpunctured, unscathed. The car began to move.

“Look at me girl,” she growled. “This is where a fifty-year subscription to *Vogue* and a disloyal husband has led me.” That’s when I knew that she was going to rip my face off, just like one of those rogue chimpanzees that some fools in California keep as pets—if someone did not intervene.

Baby Tyrant stopped the car, put it in park, and walked around to passenger-side door. He opened it. My grandmother’s nails were never letting go. They hurt so badly,
but then the sensation disappeared. Baby Tyrant ripped her, screaming, from my face, and threw her down into the valley below. It all happened so fast that I had difficulty registering the event. There was a terrible racket, an unearthly screaming, and finally, silence. Sweat and tears streamed down my face. Baby Tyrant looked at me.

“She had to go,” he said as if it were the truest thing in the world, and I believed him. I felt the claw marks on my face left from my nightmare grandmother, and I believed him.

“She wasn’t herself anymore. She had become something else. She had changed.” Baby Tyrant looked at me. It was all in his eyes, the plea for forgiveness, but it was creeping into his voice, too. “And, yes, I know that I am partially to blame. Hell, don’t I know it, kiddo.”

He reached into his pocket and took out his lighter, flicked it twice, looked down at the ground. I thought I saw a tear flash down his face, but I couldn’t see. It was so dark. As I continued to recover from the shock of seeing my grandmother-turned-banshee flung from the car to her death, I became increasingly aware of my immediate environment as well.

Mountains? Ascent? Real ones? Wasn’t all of this real enough? Baby Tyrant climbed into the car again and redirected his gaze towards the mountainscape before him. I did the same. My heart dropped out when I saw it; there wasn’t any quickening of the pulse, just that sickening drop. The path before us was a straight-up incline. I say “path,” because what would have been the road wasn’t made of gravel, but of brown burlap—one long and seemingly endless carpet of the stuff that appeared near the bottom of the mountain and vanished from sight at the peak. It was suspended slightly above the
ground at the slope’s beginning. Farther up, however, I could see that it was suspended very high above the ground, somewhere amidst the treetops.

I closed my eyes. I knew that I could open them if I wanted to, open them a reenter the real world that existed far from my wild dream, but a part of me still wanted to know what was going to happen next, what exactly it was about this island mountain that Baby Tyrant wanted to show me, so I stayed on because I knew that it was going to be fun, same as when I was a kid—fun, and also dangerous.

Baby Tyrant revved the engine. As he did, I pushed my back hard against the seat and braced myself for the ride to come.

As the car lurched forward, I felt the wheels begin to slide. Cars weren’t made to move on a reel of suspended fabric—at an angle so acute that it’s not an angle anymore, but a straight line. The incline, of course, was monstrous. The wheels of the car slipped and threatened to roll backward. At the time, I was surprised that I managed to remain conscious. Baby Tyrant still sipped his cocktail, though in small, measured quaffs. On either side of me, I felt fog; I felt clouds. Occasionally, I reached out my hand and grabbed a clump of leaves from the uppermost point of a treetop. I didn’t look at them. I just grabbed and grabbed and grabbed. Perhaps this was a coping mechanism?

The birds were there, too, though I didn’t hear them anymore. Perhaps they were sleeping. But I did hear insects, thousands upon thousands of them, whirring, chirping, creeping, crawling, jumping, scurrying, crunching, gnawing, nosing, dozing, diving, drowning—living. And the sound was pleasant, soothing, and when I looked up, I saw a sky ripe with stars, the same stars that my human and nonhuman ancestors had gorged
upon eons ago—though slightly altered, and I saw Baby Tyrant as he removed his hands from the steering wheel and turned to me.

“This is it, kiddo,” he said. “The top of the island, the top of it all.”

I smiled and reached for the sky with one hand because it felt so close, like I could touch it. Then I got a wild idea.

I pulled at the thickness of the air with my hands as if it was twisted and fibrous like a vine or a rope. I grabbed and reached and somehow began to climb up and out of the red Miata and towards the stars. As my feet lifted from the floorboard, I heard the ocean pulsing in the distance on either side of the mountain, on either side of me. I heard it surging, shrinking, re-building, blasting, reclaiming jagged pieces of unseen matter, folding them under and back into its deep belly. All the while, I continued to rise, farther and farther away from the folding, like a bird that didn’t have any wings, like a wind-born seed or an invisible spore.

“Hey kiddo,” Baby Tyrant called, squinting up at me, but by that time, my feet had left the car entirely. By that time, I was held by nothing but insect song and air. “I don’t know what you’re doing, but you should be careful,” he said. “You’ll want to come down from there.” He stood on the driver’s seat and waved me down with his hands and arms. I registered his words and I saw his gestures, but the air was enormous and fragrant with oxygen. If I could have buried my face in its freshness forever, I would have.

I waved. I smiled. I wasn’t coming down.

Below, Baby Tyrant looked concerned. He fumbled around in his shirt, extracted a lighter, along with his pack of Winston’s. He smoked, not one, not three, but four cigarettes. He never exhaled. Even in the darkness, his face looked swollen and purple,
like it was about to burst. I wanted to tell him to stop, that he didn’t need to hurt himself, not for me, not this time, but I also knew that he was a free agent, that he could do whatever he wanted to do because, of course, he always had.

Baby Tyrant released the smoke from his bloated face like a Norse wind god. But the cloud was not the wind; its most basic components didn’t dissipate like force, but cohered together in a breathing mass of dark particles. The particles hovered close to Baby Tyrant’s face. He reached out and touched them, petted them, whispered to them as if they were alive, then shaped the ominous clay that they were into yet another umbrella, the largest, blackest umbrella I had ever seen—a monstrosity for sure. Baby Tyrant held his handiwork out in front of him, twirled it once. He shook his head. His work was not done. The way he worried the stubble on his chin with the tips of his fingers told me this. Then an idea struck him. I couldn’t see his eyes when it happened, their sudden illumination, but I could see the way the water-clear momentum of epiphany urged his mind, his shoulders, his hands away from rigidity and towards creation.

I hovered in the air, in between action and inaction, in between flying and falling, a very small woman-drop suspended in space. I watched Baby Tyrant. I watched him run his hands over the umbrella’s ribs and cover; I watched it come alive and transmogrify into a giant jellyfish, a moving bag of translucent, flashing flesh. A wooden umbrella stem further augmented the potency of its strangeness. Baby Tyrant released the stem, the handle, and the umbrella pulsed up towards me until the creature met me where I was. It didn’t have any eyes that I could see, but whatever silent impulses radiated from the jellyfish umbrella struck me as benevolent. There was something trustworthy about the
way the arms and tentacles glowed and rippled. I looked down at Baby Tyrant. He smiled and gave me a generous thumbs-up.

I reached out and grasped the stem. I began to fall—not quickly, but slowly, as the jellyfish umbrella writhed and splooshed against the air above me. I felt a breeze zing over my skin. It caught the underbelly of my umbrella friend and propelled us out across the mountain valley where I saw a stand of tropical trees clustered below; the air that originated from their bodies was incredibly cool against my legs and arms—fresh. We drifted down and down, gently, gently. Eventually my legs would collide with the jungle, its creatures. What awaited me below, I knew I might not be ready for. But in that moment I was drifting, and the cool air was seeping into my skin, hydrating me in ways I had never been hydrated before. I didn’t know what Baby Tyrant was doing now. Perhaps he was observing my descent the way he’d always observed everything. Like a captain at sea. Like the god that I could never believe in. I didn’t look up. I didn’t look back. I did look down.

Time passed, passed, I had no idea how many minutes, and I began to drift into a dense fog. I couldn’t see anything, not even my own hand, and my jellyfish sidekick provided little light. Below me I heard movement, a soft rustling. All at once the birds, equipped with their peculiar music, erupted from their hiding places in a tremendous cloud of shimmering color. They swooped and dove around me, staying clear of my path, before forming a ring above me that moved with the circular acceleration of a whirlpool.

“They’re glow birds,” Baby Tyrant called down, and I had to wonder how many packs of Winston’s he had smoked to make them, to make this entire place. I could have
stayed there for a long time, I realized. I could have stayed there forever, floating down into the valley, as easy as a leaf, and I still might. “I made this whole damn world, Liz.”
Part II.
Happy Birthday, Baby Tyrant

On his sixty-third birthday, Baby Tyrant rolled off the couch at 5:00 a.m., poured bourbon to the top of his coffee mug, pulled out a cigarette, lit up, leaned out the screen door of the old tenant house, and dragged the smoke down deep before blowing the debris out his nose and mouth. He watched the ash travel on air thick and steamy from yesterday’s summer downpour, then, without looking behind him, leaned in the door backwards to search the kitchen counter for his whiskey. Mug to mouth, he drank deeply, like a steer from a water trough, closed his eyes, opened them, smacked his lips, and watched the blood-ball sun blaze into view to set his world afire. In the light, Baby Tyrant’s face, though wizened, did not look wise. He looked like a baby with wrinkles—sweetmeat cheeks glowing in the same way they had since the day he was born.

Baby Tyrant had retired from his position as an executive manager for FedEx five years ago but continued to do consulting work for the same company in California. He was a fantastic capitalist. A born capitalist. He managed, coordinated, haggled, and lambasted, all on four hours of sleep a night. Former employees broke into hives when they saw him, or loosened their collars, which grew inexplicably tight, around their necks. They blamed it on something in the air—draftiness, a new secretary’s perfume, box elder pollen. Baby Tyrant derived great pleasure from their suffering. At these times, he felt worthy of his name, which he acquired at the age of thirty when he fired twenty-three men, all management-class, in fewer than twenty-one minutes.

“You’re just a baby face,” the first employee said.
The employee’s name was Charlie Torp. The higher-ups said Charlie had a bad attitude and they weren’t lying. Before exiting the office with an earth-shattering slam of the door, Charlie spat his chew, all of it, onto the industrial carpet and pinned Baby Tyrant with an insolent stare. Baby Tyrant eyed the brown, fibrous stain from afar. Though he loved a good smoke or chew, he wasn’t one to cry over spilled tobacco. He called in the next man, the next man, and the next. He offered each a cigarette, lit it for him; he was a gentleman after all, but one who did his job well and with a faint tickle of nervousness—no, pleasure—at the base of his abdomen.

“Tyrant,” the last man muttered.

Clyde Wedel didn’t spit, and he kept his head low on the way out. His bum leg dragged behind him, making scratchy, shushing sounds as he left. Though weak in one leg, Clyde was strong in his hands. Before leaving the company for good, he trashed his filing cabinet, all ten drawers of it, which never shut properly again--and also the wooden drawer of his desk on which he carved “Fuck you” in jagged, pocketknife scrawl.

The twenty-one other men uttered similar things—indecent things, cruel things—yet when the firing ended, Baby Tyrant leaned back in his leather chair, smoked his pipe, and felt satisfied. Baby Tyrant’s boss, Michael Winters, known to his employees as Winter, phoned to check up on his young, ambitious employee.

“How did it go, Bobby?” Winter asked.

Baby Tyrant took a drag. He heard old Winter take one too.

“Well, “ Baby Tyrant said. “The first one called me a baby, and the last one called me a tyrant.”

Winter snorted.
“How do you feel about that?” Winter asked.

Baby Tyrant leaned back in his chair, staring up at the drop-ceiling tiles yellowed by tobacco smoke. He smiled.

“I kind of like it,” he said.

Baby Tyrant could almost hear Winter grinning through his fierce, springy mustache on the other line.

Winter spoke. “Maybe that’s what we’ll call you from now on: Baby Tyrant. How about that?”

Winter paused.

“Sounds good, sir,” Baby Tyrant said. He cleared his throat.

“Before I left you mentioned a promotion.”

Baby Tyrant’s heart contracted once. He held his breath.

“I certainly did,” Winter said.

Baby Tyrant breathed.

“Good job today, Baby Tyrant. Phone when you get back and we’ll talk.”

“Looking forward to it,” Baby Tyrant said and hung up.

He placed his feet on his desk—his sock-feet. His dress shoes lay abandoned on the floor, reeking of the sweat, tart and stale, that only a tyrant sweats. He felt good. Two shots of whiskey from a flask he had stored in the desk drawer earlier that day made him feel better. He slept in his chair until morning.

After that night, Baby Tyrant became a kind of corporate hit man. He traveled cross-country to various FedEx outposts, thinning out the management class wherever and whenever the higher-ups ordered. He did so with guillotine verve and no visible
remorse. The nickname stuck, kept sticking. No one called Baby Tyrant “Bobby” ever again, not his son, not even his wife Jane, and when Lizzy, Baby Tyrant’s first and only grandchild, began to speak, he made sure she called him Baby Tyrant, too. He wanted Lizzy’s respect more than her love. Lizzy wanted Baby Tyrant’s respect; she wanted to grow up to be just like him, but mostly, the little girl wanted love. When Lizzy, now six-years-old, hugged Baby Tyrant’s bony knees against her chest with the same enthusiasm she typically reserved for her stuffed frog and other plush creatures, he let her, though her affection seemed, to him, unfounded.

Baby Tyrant’s son, Joe, and daughter-in-law, Sharon, hung a picture of Baby Tyrant as a fat-cheeked toddler on the wall facing Lizzy’s bedroom. The family didn’t live on the farm, as Baby Tyrant and G. J. did, but in a small starter home, near town with easy access to the interstate, which Sharon drove on her daily commute. To Lizzy, her grandfather had always looked like a very clever piglet. Sixty-one years and many cigarettes later, Baby Tyrant smiled the same porcine smile but drank whisky in lieu of his mother’s milk. He drank the good stuff, top shelf, Maker’s Mark. Sharon bought him a bottle at Christmastime, a special one commemorating an event significant in the scheme of Kentucky sports history that Baby Tyrant now failed to recall. The pretty brown bottle stood empty on the kitchen counter. He would fill it with cheap liquor before Sharon arrived to celebrate his birthday that evening. He suspected she would bring a birthday pie as well, a coconut cream one, which was his favorite, but he would temper his expectations. He made a concerted effort to temper expectations, no matter how large or small the shape of his hope. Mostly he tempered them with booze.
When Lizzy was born, Baby Tyrant and Lizzy’s Grandmother Jane, who Lizzy called G. J., moved into the concrete-block tenant house on Joe’s farm until they could find a more urban living situation. They moved all the way back from California and Michigan, respectively, to Kentucky to be part of the family again. Sharon had long rejected the old tenant house as too pastoral for her contemporary, suburban tastes. G. J., who loved art, Shakespeare, and all things fine, also rejected the house, but on different grounds. The concrete floors were cracked, the plaster ceilings warped, and the windows far too small for taking in sunrises and sunsets. Yet, in a scant two weeks, G. J. had transformed the frowzy, quaint farm shack into a chic, folksy cottage. She did so by draining about ten grand from Baby Tyrant’s checking account. With Joe and Sharon’s help, she mounted African wall sculptures in the living room, installed storage structures in the bedrooms, rolled out antique Persian rugs in all the appropriate places, and dragged the old leggy bathtub out from the bathroom to make way for a modern shower. She set the guest bedroom aside for Lizzy’s use, and, over the years, bought her granddaughter waders so that she could enjoy the creek, along with art supplies to cultivate her latent artistic gifts.

On his sixty-third birthday, Baby Tyrant concluded that he had lived a long and monetarily successful life, one that entitled him to do whatever the hell he wanted. His granddaughter’s slumbering presence in the guest bedroom would not deter him from having a good time. Where was Jane, trusted keeper of the tiny grandchild creature? She wasn’t home and that wasn’t his problem, and if Joe wanted to fault his father for having a little drink on his birthday, he could go to hell, and Sharon, so meddlesome and
melodramatic, could, too! Baby Tyrant took another drink. The liquor warmed him. The morning air—redolent with hay, small deaths, and the witchy fog that rose from Devil’s Creek after last night’s storm—cooled him back down. Joe and Sharon were trying to conceive another child in the midst of their busy, workaday lives, so they had plopped Lizzy down at her grandpa’s for a night. They made it all about his birthday, but he knew what they were up to. He followed their logic. It also wasn’t his problem. The kiddo wasn’t his problem. Baby Tyrant rested his mug of whiskey down on the porch ledge and continued thinking about what it meant to be part of a family again. He wondered if all the extra hassle was worth it.

When Jane and Baby Tyrant resumed sharing the same space, Jane began taking great pains with her appearance. She wore black cocktail dresses with lunging necklines to display her cleavage, lined and lip-sticked her lips at least three times per day, cooked Parisian dishes with names that she pronounced accurately, filled metal bowls with water and sent rose-shaped candles floating across their surfaces. She told him she wanted to make their marriage work. Baby Tyrant had no idea what he wanted—never really had known, but all of the floaty candles and cocktail dresses had gone away now. After the last episode with Lizzy, things hadn’t been right between Baby Tyrant and Jane. He knew it, but he had no idea how to fix it. On quiet mornings, such as this, he fantasized about escape. He wanted to return to California to live with his artsy mistress, Marsha, in her palatial manse on the hill. The thought warmed him almost as much as the whiskey had, but his conscience, more keen since his return to Kentucky and family life, stung him like one of the ground-nesting bees in Joe’s tobacco barn. He saw Lizzy in his mind’s eye—pigtails swinging, eyes bright and hungry for the world. She knew he was rotten and
mangier than an old tomcat, yet she loved him in the naively limitless way that children do.

One day, Baby Tyrant decided, the girl will wise up.

As Baby Tyrant reached for another cigarette, Clyde, the gray farm cat, jumped onto the porch, mewling and licking at the callouses on Baby Tyrant’s heels, which were ticklish. Baby Tyrant quickly surfaced from his reverie.

He looked directly into Clyde’s pleased, purring face.

“Get!” Baby Tyrant hissed.

Clyde released another rumbly purr before Baby Tyrant booted him several feet across the porch. Clyde landed and immediately resumed purring in a deep, resonant way. His golden, carnivorous eyes beamed into Baby Tyrant’s blue, bloodshot ones. He flicked his soft tail against the wood then licked his ear, which was torn and bleeding. He didn’t run from Baby Tyrant; he waited. The two had an understanding. Baby Tyrant punted Clyde like a football when the cat did anything disagreeable, and Clyde loved his assailant all the more for it. The cat always came back for more, and Baby Tyrant always obliged. In rare moments of almost manic exuberance, Baby Tyrant slid the cat saucers, decadent with milk, or set open tins of pungent, spicy sardines before him like a banquet. Sometimes, especially when Jane felt put out with Baby Tyrant and went to bed without fixing supper, Baby Tyrant ate the sardines, too. Of late, he ate them almost every night, if he elected to eat anything at all.

Baby Tyrant stepped inside, closed the screen door behind him, and opened the closet where Joe, who became the farm’s official owner after Baby Tyrant gifted him the house and land, stored the cat food behind a garbage can overflowing with beer and Coke
cans. Baby Tyrant leaned against the closet door. Four flattened Budweiser cases stood, tidily, off to the left. *Whoever said drunks had to be sloppy?* Baby Tyrant thought and hoisted the bag up to his rapidly disappearing gut. His face was the only round, fleshy part of him left. Where the fat went, everyone knew, for they hardly saw him eat in between beers, but they pretended not to know because it was easier that way. In place of knowledge, Sharon, Joe, G.J., along with every other relative and peripheral acquaintance on Devil’s Creek, had *suspicions*. They suspected Baby Tyrant drank too much. They suspected he might be an alcoholic. They suspected he might need help, but the family kept their silence to keep the family together; if they didn’t acknowledge Baby Tyrant’s drinking problem, then perhaps it wasn’t all that bad. In a similar vein, neighbors ignored Baby Tyrant’s obvious drunkenness out of respect for his family’s desire to appear normal, for the neighbors, hampered as they were by heroin addicts, meth heads, funny uncles, and pregnant teens, expected the same courtesy. A delicately feigned ignorance of the reality of life on Devil’s Creek was all they asked for.

At the end of the hallway, six-year-old Lizzy, who had her very own suspicions (about many things), lay burrowed in her blankets like a small, earth-dwelling bird, awake, but with her tiny bird eyes shut tight, as if willing the sun, and all the other unpleasant things a day could bring, back behind the hills. Days could bring angry looks from fathers, sharp sounds from kitchens, tornados, visits from witches or evil spirits, as well as a thousand other unwanted and deeply unpleasant things that she preferred to avoid. The last time she stayed with Baby Tyrant, he had left her in the creek alone. He said he would come back but never did. She had seen something awful in the creek, the carcass of black dog with its tongue lolling out, burned to a crisp on a creek rock. She
suspected that witches had burned the dog in a secret ritual, but witches weren’t the only things that scared her. The night before, as Lizzy lay in bed, trying to read a grownup book that G.J. had left on the bedside table, she heard her father and Baby Tyrant arguing. They used curse words, which sounded harsh and made Lizzy’s heart feel like a broken clock. She didn’t feel sad or scared, just bad.

*Why don’t you stop? Don’t you know I’m awake?* she wanted to say.

Lizzy set the book she was reading aside. She couldn’t understand it anyway, so she listened to the argument.

“It’s 9:00 p.m. Why isn’t Mom back?” Lizzy’s father asked.

Baby Tyrant cleared his throat.

“She called me from the airport in New York,” he said. There’s been another delay. She won’t be in until early tomorrow.”

Lizzy’s father hit the countertop with his hand before he spoke.

“What do you mean the plane got delayed again? You said she would be here by 9:00 p.m., no later. Where the hell is she, Dad? I promised Sharon I wouldn’t let you watch Lizzy again, not after your last fuckup.” Lizzy’s father paused.

Baby Tyrant belched.

Lizzy’s father sighed and slapped the table, and though G. J. never made an appearance, Lizzy heard her father slam the front door, get in his truck, and pull out of the gravel drive. Lizzy didn’t understand what “fuckup” meant, though she suspected it had something to do with the burnt-dog incident, and, yes, Baby Tyrant had forgotten her and she had become scared, but he was way more fun than anyone else in her family. G. J. corrected her grammar too much, her father never let her drink chocolate milk, and her
mother told her she didn’t look very lady-like when she wore her favorite overalls with the broken strap hanging down on one side. Lizzy found this all very stressful. Baby Tyrant let her do whatever she wanted. He fixed her hot chocolate for breakfast, hollered “Yee-haw,” and told her she looked like a little country girl, which Lizzy liked. He even said curse words. He never corrected her grammar. Sometimes when he was joking around, he scared her. Sometimes he said mean things that made her cry.

From beneath her covers, Lizzy heard the screen door slam and flinched. It reminded her of last night’s argument and other sources of the bad feeling in her heart, so she imagined each eyelash as if it were a tiny nail, holding its small piece of eyelid shut, but she couldn’t fall back asleep, nor did she really want to. Ultimately, Lizzy’s curiosity, much more intrinsic to her character than anxiety, motivated her to get out of bed. She could hear Baby Tyrant doing something on the porch and wanted to know what it was. Lizzy wore a flannel nightgown covered in gingerbread men with red ribbons tied at their throats. Though it was summer, the gingerbread nightgown was Lizzy’s favorite, and consequently, the only one she agreed to wear. At her bedroom window, she stood on her tiptoes with her chin planted against the dusty sill, taking in whatever there was to see.

Lizzy was out of school for the summer and her parents, who were busy, busy, working, working, asked if she would help make Baby Tyrant birthday special and she had agreed. Lizzy enjoyed spending the night at Baby Tyrant’s and particularly on special occasions, such as birthdays or the Fourth of July. Lizzy’s mother said that Baby Tyrant would be sixty-three-years-old. Lizzy couldn’t imagine what it must feel like to be that old and didn’t want to. In Lizzy’s mind, all old people were the same age: wrinkly.
Lizzy’s mother had also told her that G. J. would be back from Michigan when her father dropped her off at Baby Tyrant’s after daycare, but G. J.’s plane had gotten delayed, and a day later, on Baby Tyrant’s birthday, G. J. still wasn’t home. Lizzy didn’t know for sure but suspected that her father hadn’t told her mother about G. J.’s plane, and after what had happened the last time Baby Tyrant watched her, Lizzy could understand why. Her mother had ignored her father for two whole days.

On the front porch, Baby Tyrant cursed and wrestled the bag of cat food around until he got it open. “Here boy,” he said. Clyde purred, weaving in and out of his master’s legs on the wooden beams below. Baby Tyrant poured the red-brown fish shapes into a bowl with one hand and grabbed a garden hose with the other. He aimed the nozzle at Clyde’s rump. One week ago today, Clyde had pissed on G. J.’s favorite Persian rug. At Baby Tyrant’s feet, Clyde purred and chewed his food in a state of rapture, making clinking sounds as he emptied the bowl of its meat-tasting morsels. Behind him, Baby Tyrant turned the water knob on and watched the cold water hiss in the hose, catch in the tangled places, but gather volume and speed all the same, until it spurted out the end, long and robust of movement, like a good, cold piss.

As the water made contact with Clyde’s anus and balls, the cat stiffened before making like a fur-covered bullet for the hills. On a gravel road running parallel to the farmhouse, Clyde slowed to a slinky, ball-swinging trot, purring like a pair of iron lungs all the way down to Devil’s Creek. Baby Tyrant laughed, spraying hose water and spilling whisky everywhere. Clyde paused near Devil’s Creek. He took in its sweet, algal odor of the water, muddy and swollen from last night’s rain, and began to dream of sardines and other fish-like creatures. His small cat stomach, unsatisfied by the red fish
shapes, which had the texture and aftertaste of gravel, gurgled. His torn ear clotted over and began to heal.

At her bedroom window, Lizzy watched Baby Tyrant’s strange outburst with a mixture of concern and glee. She cocked her head to one side, studying Baby Tyrant through the warped, water-like glass. _My grandfather is a mad man_, she thought— _no, tricky_, she decided, though she supposed he was allowed to be however he wanted on his birthday. She also wondered when her grandmother would return. G. J. knew how to make Baby Tyrant behave, and she never left Lizzy anywhere by herself.

Two evenings before, as Sharon tucked Lizzy into bed and straightened her layers upon layers of blankets, she invited her daughter to play a more grown-up role in Baby Tyrant’s birthday festivities.

“Baby Tyrant’s birthday is two days away. Make a nice card for him. He’ll appreciate it.”

To Lizzy, making a card sounded like a lot of work. She much preferred to draw pictures of chickens, smiling families of them, for no one in particular to enjoy—except for _her_. Baby Tyrant taught Lizzy how to draw, and Lizzy decided that he could make his own stupid card if he really wanted one. She rolled away from Sharon to face the wall.

“Wouldn’t you want someone to make you a card for you on your birthday?” Sharon prompted.

“I’ll have to think about it,” Lizzy said to the wall.

Sharon stroked her daughter’s hair and grinned. She knew what was coming.
Lizzy turned to face Sharon and looked up at her sideways with sleepy, calculating eyes.

“Will you buy me a new pack of crayons?” she asked.

Sharon shook her head “no.”

“You can use the ones you have at the farm, Lizzy.”

Lizzy huffed and puffed, but Sharon held fast, then she patted Lizzy’s hair and told her a secret, an extra special, top secret secret that Lizzy was not, under any circumstances, to repeat.

“We’re going to throw Baby Tyrant a surprise birthday party,” Sharon said. “Now doesn’t that sound fun?”

Lizzy nodded. Last year, her parents threw her a surprise birthday at the roller rink and it was very fun. Her best friend, Mary, stuck a pixie stick up her nose and couldn’t get it out. She said it tingled.

Sharon looked directly into Lizzy’s eyes. “Now, if we want to throw someone a surprise birthday, do we tell them about it?”

“No,” Lizzy said, shaking her head. Her eyes lit up. “Not if it’s a surprise,” she finished.

“Very good,” Sharon said.

Lizzy sat up in bed and drew her knees into her stomach. She smiled somewhat maniacally.

“Can I dress up as Kit Carson like I did at Christmastime?” she asked.

Sharon’s mouth grew tight.

“Do you want to live in the past, sweetie?” Sharon asked.
Lizzy looked at the ceiling. She had to think about it. Kit Carson, pioneer hero of the Mexican American War, was born two miles from Lizzy’s house. He was born at a time when Daniel Boone walked the land. One day, as Daniel Boone walked and hunted, the Indians caught him, stripped him naked, except for his fur hat, and carried him through the woods to stay in one of their teepees. Lizzy had learned all about it during her first-grade trip to Fort Boonesborough through paintings, which the adults passed around.

It all sounded very exciting. Life today was just too boring. Her father and Baby Tyrant talked about the past all the time. They did it with a happy, faraway look in their eyes.

“Yeah—sometimes. For fun,” she said.

Sharon gave her daughter a firm look.

“Well, you can’t live in the past. You better learn that now, or else you’ll end up like your father and grandfather.”

Lizzy wanted to ask her mother why it would be bad to end up like her father or grandfather, but Sharon refocused the conversation around Baby Tyrant’s surprise party.

“I’m going to bake your grandfather a coconut cream pie because I know he likes them. Your Daddy’s going to grill some hamburgers and hot dogs. G. J.’s going to come back from Michigan early to celebrate. She’ll be there when Daddy takes you to Baby Tyrant’s after daycare. She’ll make her cucumber-onion salad.”

Sharon gave Lizzy a serious look.

“I want you to make your grandfather a birthday card. You’ll spend the night with Baby Tyrant and G. J. tomorrow, so that I can pick you up on his birthday and we can all give him his surprises.”

“I’ll do it!” Lizzy said.
Lizzy felt excited beyond belief. Whenever she stayed with Baby Tyrant, they always had fun. Lizzy hoped he would take her to the creek to see the fossils and that the burnt dog would be long-gone. It had to be gone by now, and the word “surprise” sounded slippery and sparkly—like popping bubbles. Lizzy smiled, clapped her hands, turned to her mother and glanced at her sideways, gleefully this time. Sharon pressed her finger against her own soft, lip-sticked mouth. Lizzy touched her mother’s mouth, which she had always liked doing. Sharon smiled with her mouth closed as Lizzy took her finger away and held it against her own small mouth until Sharon kissed Lizzy’s forehead and retreated to her bedroom to take off her pantyhose and read Woman’s Day.

Tomorrow, Sharon would begin ovulating. She had her cycle charted out in her daily planner in a code that only she could understand. Though she wasn’t feeling overly amorous, she hoped that she and Joe could make some progress the next day while Lizzy stayed with her grandparents. At thirty-six, her biological clock was ticking, and she felt it maternally irresponsible to leave her daughter in the world without a sibling.

In the cool basement, Joe snored on the couch while the TV played in the background. Occasionally, he snored so loudly that he woke himself up long enough to locate the remote and switch the channel, before falling back asleep.

Lizzy, tiny in her enormous bed, couldn’t sleep. She had a secret, one that her mother had given her, one with pies and candles and cucumbers, and though her eyelids drooped, fluttered open, then drooped again, she refused to let the secret out of her sight. She made a special prayer to God that evening.

*Dear God,* she said, *please don’t let the Sandman put sand in my eyes and hypnotize me and take my secret away.* Amen.
Baby Tyrant told Lizzy that the Sandman stole dreams. He had a sparkly look in his eye when he said it, so she didn’t know if she should believe him, but she didn’t want to take any chances. The prayer calmed her, and she slept.

Lizzy awoke the next morning with sand in her eyes, but, somehow, the secret felt intact. She carried it around in her brain the same way she carried art projects around her Baby Bop backpack. Before Lizzy went to daycare that morning, she packed the friendly-looking dinosaur with everything she needed for her big day. At daycare, she pulled the secret out of her brain, like a pretty stone, to gaze upon it. When Mary asked her to play dominos, Lizzy told her that she had other things to think about, grown-up things to think about. Mary had light brown hair, tanned skin, and a long, gangly frame. Like Lizzy, she gravitated to the sidelines of playtime, to the quiet.

“What’s the secret?” Mary asked.

Lizzy gestured for Mary to come closer. Mary held her head to Lizzy’s mouth.

“A surprise birthday party,” Lizzy said.

Mary contorted her face, before pressing it against Lizzy’s ear. “For who?” she asked.

“It’s a secret,” Lizzy said.

“You can tell me,” Mary said, but Lizzy shook her head.

“That’s the point. I can’t give the secret away. My mom told me, and I can’t tell anyone else.”

Mary pouted. “But I’m your best friend. I won’t say anything. Promise.”

Though Lizzy knew, from the look in Mary’s eyes, that her friend meant what she said, Lizzy held fast in her observance of the secret. She felt special. She felt powerful.
When Mary stomped away, Lizzy got the secret out again, turning it over and over again in her mind.

*What,* she wondered, *would Baby Tyrant like for his birthday?*

For the rest of the day, until Joe picked her up to drive her out to the farm, the secret grew more and more elaborate. She decided they must sing to Baby Tyrant on his birthday, that they must go to the creek together for an adventure. She had ideas.

Joe arrived at Lizzy’s daycare covered from glasses to boots in cow manure. He also smelled like cigarette smoke and his beard looked like a wild man’s. Lizzy tried not to act embarrassed. Her father was a farmer and farmers smoked cigarettes and got dirty. That’s what they did. Lizzy swallowed her child-sized pride, ran towards her father, and hugged his legs.

Joe patted Lizzy on the head and snatched up Baby Bop from Lizzy’s cubby. He took her hand and they walked out into the summer sun. Joe noticed one cloud in the sky. It coasted across the blueness all alone. It was early June in Kentucky. Come evening, he knew there would be rain. It had been a wet spring, and Joe and his cattle didn’t need any more rain. Joe reassured himself that more rain, or whatever other vagaries the weather or the market or the world had in store, would equal the end of his small farming operation. He turned his attention to Lizzy.

“How’s it going, Liz?” Joe always called Lizzy “Liz.” She liked it because it made her feel like a grown-up.

Lizzy didn’t answer but started to skip. Joe looked down at her, smiling.

“Why so excited?” he asked.
Lizzy continued skipping and smiling. “Duh,” she said, looking up at her father.

“Because it’s Baby Tyrant’s birthday tomorrow, and I get to spend the night with him and G. J. and throw him a surprise party.”

Joe smiled. Of course Lizzy would decide that *she* was the one throwing the party. He snorted.

“Whatver you say, little boss,” he said, ruffling her hair.

“Hey!” Lizzy said. “Don’t mess up my pigtails!”

When the pair reached the parking lot, Joe scooped Lizzy up and set her in the passenger seat of his massive Ford truck. Sharon didn’t think Joe needed such a large truck, and certainly not a red one, but Joe said he needed it for farm work. Lizzy didn’t mind the truck’s size; it was the smell and appearance of manure that bothered her. There was poop *everywhere*.

As Joe buckled Lizzy in, she looked earnestly into his eyes.

“You and your truck smell like poop,” she said.

Her eyes glistened with sympathy. Joe tried not to laugh.

When they reached the farmhouse, Joe shot the sky a quick farmer’s glance. The whole thing had darkened. Joe didn’t need rain. The cattle had already slopped the place up. Joe tore his gaze away from the sky. Whatever the weather, he needed to put two of the cattle out of their misery today and the sooner he dropped Lizzy off and got the deed done, the better.

Baby Tyrant stood on the front porch smoking. He leaned against one of the beams supporting the porch roof and gave his son and granddaughter a dubious look.
Clyde, who sat beside Baby Tyrant, did the same. Joe saw the look. He didn’t like it.

Joe’s eyes, which were blue like his father’s, but much clearer, grew frosty.

Lizzy noticed the change in her father’s eyes. She guessed that he needed another cigarette. Lizzy’s mother always said that not having a cigarette put Joe in a bad mood. Lizzy made eye contact with her father.

“Why don’t you have a cigarette?” she said.

“Don’t encourage me, Liz,” he said.

Joe’s gaze remained fixed on Baby Tyrant. He wanted to knock the dubious look, which had morphed into a smirk, right off his father’s face. No way in hell was he letting Baby Tyrant watch his daughter if he had been drinking, and where was his mother anyway? She was supposed to be home from the airport, but her black Mercury wasn’t in the drive.

Joe opened his truck door, shut it, set Lizzy, the tiniest six-year-old he had ever met, down on the gravel, handed Lizzy Baby Bop, grabbed her hand, and slammed the passenger door. Sharon was already put out with Joe. The last time Baby Tyrant watched Lizzy, he had gotten drunk and allowed her to walk the length of Devil’s Creek alone. When Sharon came to pick Lizzy up that evening, she found her daughter sitting on a creek stone at the entrance to the farm near the metal gate, which swung wide open, sobbing. Baby Tyrant was nowhere in sight, but Clyde, who disliked all humans except Baby Tyrant, sat in Lizzy’s lap, purring and rubbing his bumpy, battle-scarred head against Lizzy’s hands and face. If Joe had anything to do with it, that would never happen again.
Baby Tyrant waved to Lizzy from the porch and grinned. She waved back excitedly, pigtails waggling. As Joe and Lizzy stepped onto the porch, Baby Tyrant reached for the screen door and held it open, stepping in after his son and granddaughter. Once inside, Lizzy hugged Baby Tyrant hard around the knees before scampering off to her designated bedroom to more fully claim the space as her own. She pulled all the contents from her backpack and threw them onto the bed. All the colorful clothes looked like an explosion, like a surprise.

In the kitchen, Joe, who played football in high school and was five inches taller than his father, grabbed Baby Tyrant by the shoulder and gave him a direct look. Baby Tyrant raised his eyebrows.

*What?* he seemed to ask.

Joe stood so close to Baby Tyrant that he could smell his father’s breath. It didn’t smell good. It smelled like coffee and cigarettes, but it didn’t smell like whiskey either. Joe loosened his grip. Maybe there was hope yet.

“Where’s Mom?” Joe asked. “Sharon almost had my head after the last incident. The only reason Sharon is allowing Lizzy to be around you at all is because Mom is supposed to be back from the airport, but she isn’t here.”

Baby Tyrant cleared his throat.

“Your mother’s plane got delayed,” he said. “She won’t be back until nine this evening.”

“She better be back. You really messed up the last time, Dad.” Joe’s grip tightened.

Baby Tyrant nodded, twice, in agreement.
“Sorry. I slipped up, son,” he said.

“Yeah, you did,” Joe agreed. He shook his head.

“Won’t happen again, son.”

Joe hoped not. He felt uneasy about leaving Lizzy with him. Sharon would have his hide, if she knew he knew that Baby Tyrant was the only one to care for her. But he had to get back to work. No time for marital drama at the moment.

He gave Baby Tyrant a curt nod, hoped his father would keep his shit together, then headed out the door, mounting his large red steed, and tearing off towards the tobacco barn on the opposite side of the farm where two sick steers lay shivering in the hay. Their large, innocent eyes were tired and feverish. When Joe saw them, lying there, he knew what he had to do. He petted the heads of the cattle with his pink, calloused hands.

“It’ll be all right, boys,” he said. Then he went to the truck, opened the glove compartment, and reached inside. The pistol felt cold in his hands.

At the farmhouse, as Lizzy drank her first cup of hot chocolate, she heard the shots and startled.

“Don’t worry,” Baby Tyrant said. “Some guys are out hunting.”

Baby Tyrant leaned against the countertop and belched. Lizzy tried to belch, too, but couldn’t. She believed Baby Tyrant and she also didn’t. For a moment, she glanced at him sideways, as she often did. He lit a cigarette and leaned out the screen door, ignoring her.
Now, with Baby Tyrant on his birthday, Lizzy continued to stand at her bedroom window where she watched Baby Tyrant turn off the hose. She wondered about Clyde and felt bad for him. It must have been awfully uncomfortable to get sprayed directly in the privates, but Lizzy didn’t meditate upon Clyde’s plight too long. She had work to do. After deciding that her grandfather was occupied with whatever he was doing, Lizzy opened the closet where G. J. stored the art supplies. She would make Baby Tyrant a birthday card, as promised. Lizzy got out a piece of thick drawing paper, as well as a box of crayons, and sprawled, belly-first, on the rug near her bed. She drew a picture of herself, stick arms raised, stick fingers and wrists elongated and flicked forward like a monster’s. Her dark hair—long, erratic lines of brown and black and purple—blossomed around her vampire’s grin like a storm cloud. *I’m a monster*, she thought.

“I’m mischievous,” she said out loud and savored the slippery sound of a word she had only just acquired under G.J.’s enriching, corrective, and relentless tutelage.

Afterwards, she folded the paper in half, hamburger style, to hide the drawing within. On the front, in purple crayon, she wrote, “Happy birthday Babie Tierent,” and taped the card shut.

The sun came through the window. Lizzy closed her eyes as the light fell on her face. She hid the card in her pillowcase then stepped out of her nightgown and into her daytime uniform of blue jean Oshkosh overalls with one broken shoulder strap. Beneath these overalls, she wore a white t-shirt and her Pocahontas underwear. Standing on her tiptoes, she gazed at herself in the mirror. She liked her hair down, but her mother did not, so she used G. J.’s big comb to whisk her soft hair into two high pigtails, which she
accented with one green and one magenta pigtail holder. Pigtails in place, she waggled them from side to side like a cocker spaniel and giggled, then stopped.

From across the room, she could feel her black waders staring at her. Hands on hips, she swiveled, and tilted her head like a bird of prey, with her chin touching her collarbone, to look at them. The boots, her most prized possessions, were moldy and full of spiders, perhaps poisonous ones. She crawled on her hands and knees across the concrete floor, saluting tumbling dust bunnies as she went. When she reached the other side of the room, she held a wader up to her face, and buried her nose deep down inside the rubber until she could smell Devil’s Creek, the stingy, algal parts that lingered there long after the soles had dried. The creek smelled the same as the water that traveled down from the cobwebby cistern at the top of the hill and ran up through the house pipes and out from the shower nozzle and onto Lizzy’s cold, butt-naked body on days, such as last Easter, when she played in poison ivy and her grandmother caught her and tried to hose the poison off.

The water smelled like the poop in her grandmother’s ostomy pouch. G. J. had a hole below her below belly button that looked like a worm’s mouth. If Lizzy hugged her grandmother, would she grow a hole, too? She decided she might. “No more hugs for G.J.,” she said, but the words hurt her mouth. They sounded small and mean like they might pinch.

Though Lizzy’s grandmother carried poop in her ostomy pouch, she always smelled good, like fancy perfume. She wore fancy clothes too, read fancy books, said fancy things like *mischievous, cardigan,* and *bamboozle.* Everyone loved her, and Lizzy did too. So Lizzy dug a hole for the bad thought in her head, and buried it. At the
moment, G. J. was visiting friends in Michigan. Though it was June, Lizzy still imagined G. J. in her big furry coat and mittens trundling through the Michigan snow beneath street lamps as she laughed with her old lady friends, all retired English teachers, who, like G.J., made sure that their grandchildren spoke and wrote the King’s English. Lizzy had visited G. J. in Michigan with her parents when she was four, and she remembered little else about it, save the snow, G. J.’s fur coat, and the clean, apple smell of G. J.’s house. Baby Tyrant wasn’t there. At the time, he and G. J. were just friends and he lived in California. That’s what Lizzy’s parents said.

Despite Lizzy’s warm imaginings, the wormy thought about G. J.’s stomach hole wriggled, so Lizzy grabbed another sheet of paper from G. J.’s stash and drew pictures of smiling families of chickens. That the flesh-and-blood creatures lacked teeth didn’t faze her in the least. She drew page after page of the beaky, gizzard-bearing critters, until the pages yielded up their own magic and became a story. She contemplated giving Baby Tyrant the story as a birthday present but liked it so much that she opted to keep it for herself instead. She tucked the small booklet inside her Baby Bop backpack, carefully, as her mother often instructed her, so that the pages wouldn’t bend.

Lizzy sat on her bed. Ten seconds passed and she grew bored. She sighed. When Baby Tyrant came in from the porch, she would beg him to take her to the creek. She knew he liked the creek, almost as much as she did, and though her mother had always told her not to beg people for things, and especially not on their birthdays, Lizzy viewed the request, and walk, as yet another surprise. Her mother also told her not to get in the car with Baby Tyrant if he was acting funny, and her father said the same thing, but Baby Tyrant always acted funny. That’s why she liked him so much.
Devil’s Creek flowed around all three sides of the Blacks’ farm, circling Joe’s land and separating it from the property of his neighbors. Joe planted tobacco on three relatively flat hilltops because tobacco was the only cash crop that grew well in the hilly, silty, sandy, clayey, rocky soil of his East-central Kentucky farm—or, the only one that stayed rooted in place, growing in one, pre-selected spot, rather than roaming about on four latently face-kicking, fence-hopping, land-wrecking legs.

Joe had some face-kickers, too: seventy-nine head of angus-Hereford cattle, some of them black, some of them red, some of them brown and spotted with white, all of them covered in excrement and quick to sicken, not for lack of space or air. Joe gave his cattle free roam of several choice alfalfa fields and erected salt licks rich with minerals in all the appropriate places. Perhaps being born into the role of walking meat came with its own special stresses? Whatever the cause, two of the creatures lay near the tobacco barn, massive black bodies sprinkled with lime. The bloody holes in their foreheads attracted common flies who deposited their young in the day-old wounds. The day before, as Joe loaded his gun, he had smoked six cigarettes. It never got easier, the killing, but the misery of the doomed beasts bothered him, and so he shot, and shot to kill. Afterwards, he smoked five more cigarettes. He wondered how Lizzy and Baby Tyrant were getting along. His father had promised him that he wouldn’t drink, that his days of fucking up were over, but Joe wasn’t so sure. He wanted to trust his father, but he trusted his mother more. The sooner she returned from Michigan, the better.
As Baby Tyrant and his granddaughter walked the gravel path sloping down towards Devil’s Creek, because Lizzy had asked for her way and gotten it, they passed the dead bodies of the cattle. Lizzy and her high-swinging ponytails came to an abrupt, wader-screeching halt. She shivered like a young tree reeling from the fresh after-voltage of a lightning strike. Baby Tyrant stopped too.

“Where are their eyes?” Lizzy asked. Her small shoulders slumped.

Baby Tyrant looked out across the tobacco field Joe had seeded in alfalfa and clover.

“What happened to their eyes?” she repeated. Lizzy’s own eyes, rimmed in red, discharged long silvery tears.

Baby Tyrant passed her his hanky. This was a common occurrence with them. Lizzy saw something that upset her, cried. Baby Tyrant passed her his hanky. Baby Tyrant said something that upset her, she cried, he passed her his hanky. Lizzy honked into fabric made warm by Baby Tyrant’s pocket, then stretched the handkerchief out before her like a map to fondly observe the sheen of her own snot, which cast a glossy netting, much like a spider’s web, across the red and white floral pattern.

“Buzzards got ‘em,” Baby Tyrant said, flicking his lighter once. “That’s how things work in the animal world, kid.” He puffed smoke into the air and gritted his yellow teeth.

Lizzy pried herself away from the wonder of her own snot, looked down at the ground, and back up again. Her brow furrowed.

“Am I an animal?” she asked.
Her squinty brown eyes looked so earnest and oh-so-wide. Baby Tyrant spotted Clyde moussing down near Devil’s Creek where the American chestnut tree, a two-hundred-year-old sucker, more dead than alive, stood. The tree’s hollow formed a small room. Baby Tyrant saw a fox huddled in there once, red coat blazing like a fire, pale beady eyes gleaming out from the dark. The fox looked like the last maple leaves fluttering, soft and loose, on black branches at the end of fall.

On a morning when the steam rose from Devil’s Creek and overflowed, tide-like, to cover the banks and the grass, Baby Tyrant watched the fuzzy kits emerge from the hollow and pour into the gray-gold field, warm and new, like animate, scurrying embers.

Baby Tyrant decided to answer Lizzy’s question. “Yeah, you’re an animal,” he said, looking at the tree and into his own mind. “You and me both.”

Lizzy sniffed. She didn’t want to cry again, especially not in front of Baby Tyrant, who was tough and never cried, but the tears broke loose and she couldn’t push them back in. The snot ran down from her nose. She got in another good honk before handing the gooey fabric back. Baby Tyrant gave the cloth a dubious look.

“You need to start carrying your own handkerchief,” he said. The smoke from his cigarette trailed up into Lizzy’s nose. She sneezed tears along with thin, slimy ribbons of soil particles.

Baby Tyrant smoked his cigarette down, tossed the butt into the gravel, then gave the ashes a few good tamps with his boot. The fluffy white part of the butt that looked like a dandelion, but was not a dandelion, remained. Some days, Lizzy tried to count all the dandelion-looking parts lying around in the fields, but there were so many of them tossed here and there that she would lose count and have to start all over, which would
take all day, and Lizzy didn’t have all day. Sometimes she pocketed the white parts and counted them before bedtime instead, like a secret. Lizzy bent down to retrieve the cooling butt. Baby Tyrant swatted the air near her hand.

“What the hell are you doing, Lizzy?”

“What’s the hell are you doing, Lizzy?”

“Nothing,” Lizzy said, drawing her hand back and pouting. “I want to go to the creek,” she said.

Baby Tyrant drew another cigarette from his pack.

“I want to go to the creek,” she repeated.

Lizzy eyeballed the black bodies all covered in lime, then looked Baby Tyrant straight in his smart, piggy face.

“I want to see the crawdads and the snakes and the bugs,” she said, speaking fast. “I want to see those rocks where the dead things look alive.”

Baby Tyrant puffed smoke into the air directly above her head, and Lizzy drug her left wader through the gravel like the head of a bulldozer until she struck dirt, still wet from a rainstorm the evening before. Lizzy began driving her toe into the ground, deeper and deeper, harder and harder until a mud puddle formed. Lizzy wasn’t satisfied. She wanted to expose big rocks. Forget digging to China. She wanted to dig straight to hell, to expose Satan with his ugly horns, scraggly goatee, and stupid pitchfork. He didn’t scare her. Nothing did, not in the dark mood she was in. Lizzy’s gastric juices collaborated to emit a ferocious growl. She fixed the dirt near her foot with a baneful look and kicked it extra hard. The dirt was not a cow. It was deader than any dead cow had ever been. It could be kicked and kicked and kicked.

“Hey, cut it out,” Baby Tyrant said.
“You never want to go to the creek,” Lizzy said and crisscrossed her arms into a savage pretzel. From the ominous comfort of her tangled limbs, Lizzy glared up at Baby Tyrant sideways.

“Just because it’s your birthday doesn’t mean you get to be boring and smoke all day,” she said.

Baby Tyrant snorted, dashed his cigarette out, and grinned. Deep in her waders, Lizzy felt a spider creep over her left toe, while something that felt like a roly-poly settled against her right. The tops of her waders, which weren’t so high, cut into her naked legs, leaving indentions, which she ran her fingers across, side to side. She already felt bad about digging for Satan and begging Baby Tyrant to do something on his birthday, even if it was for him. She wondered if he would tell her mother. A juicy teardrop the exact flavor of regret squeezed its way out of the corner of Lizzy’s left eye and dribbled into the open furrow of her small, pouty mouth. She felt hungry. She felt guilty. She felt mean.

“Hey, Lizard!” Baby Tyrant said.

When Lizzy looked toward him, he flashed a smile and started to do a little jig. He danced from right to left, kicking out his legs like the pretty black ladies Lizzy saw on old TV re-runs who wore bowls of pineapples and bananas on the tops of their heads. Then he sang!

“I feel pretty!” he began. “Cha-cha-cha. Oh so pretty,” he roared. “Cha-cha-cha.” He raised his arms in the air like a bird, fluttered them down to his waist, bowed deep, lifted his head, and cheesed a smile so hard his eyes disappeared into his dark, leathery cheeks.
Lizzy beamed a wild monster’s smile and clapped. “Do it again!” she squealed, jumping onto one wader and then the other.

Baby Tyrant performed twice more before the act lost its appeal and Lizzy asked to go to the creek once more. Baby Tyrant yawned into his palm.

“Why don’t we take the four-wheeler down to the creek?” he said. “It’ll be fun. An adventure.”

At the word “adventure,” Lizzy’s heart squirmed like the creatures that lived in her waders. Kit Carson, pioneer hero, went on adventures, and he wore his furry hat while he did it. Lizzy’s father kept a similar-looking hat in a spot in the closet where she couldn’t reach. But sometimes her father let her wear the hat, and Lizzy would howl and roam the wilderness of her family’s backyard like a pioneer-turned-coyote-turned Indian, sniffing the cool air that rose from the willows near the frog pond for spirits and secrets. After the thrill of the word died down, Lizzy looked at the ground, then back up at Baby Tyrant. She asked herself if he was acting funny and decided he was.

“I can walk,” she said, still looking down.

Baby Tyrant saw the uncharacteristic sheepishness of his tiny granddaughter and stiffened. Sensing the change in his posture, Lizzy immediately grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

“I love you, Baby Tyrant,” she said, smiling.

Baby Tyrant smiled at Lizzy with his eyes, but his thoughts traveled away from him until they stopped, hovering like a storm cloud over the field in front of him. What had Joe and Sharon been telling Lizzy about her grandfather? Baby Tyrant squeezed Lizzy’s hand, which was unbelievably small, and cold, as if it had been dipped in ice
water. The sun highlighted the feathery softness of her hair and the painful innocence of her chubby face all dotted with freckles. Creek princess, he thought.

“I love you, too,” he said, and he held her hand all the way down to the creek. When his hand started to shake, he drew it back.

“Are you cold, Baby Tyrant?” Lizzy asked. The air felt warm and heavy. She opened her mouth like a creek minnow, or perhaps like a larger, bottom-feeding fish, testing it.

“I’m fine,” Baby Tyrant said. He didn’t look fine. To Lizzy, he looked like her mother when she stayed at work too long, got a headache, and took three Motrin instead of one.

“You’re not fine,” Lizzy said, shaking her pigtails from side to side. They hit the sides of her neck, back and forth, back and forth, like two silky propeller blades. “You’re sick,” she said. “You have a headache.”

Lizzy fixed Baby Tyrant with a knowing gaze, tapped her forehead once, and shook her head up and down. The pigtails bounced against her shoulders.

“It’s bad luck to be sick on your birthday,” she added, then, standing on the very tips of her trembling toes, she reached up and touched Baby Tyrant’s wrinkled brow with her fingers like a doctor in miniature.

“You know what?” Baby Tyrant said, hoisting Lizzy up in his arms and setting her down on the rock fence line in front of him. She was lighter than the bag of cat food. “I’m gonna run up to the house and get a snack. You sit here, and when I come back, we’ll wade out to the cliff like I promised.”
He smiled at Lizzy and patted her left leg, which swung out in front of her. Lizzy stopped swinging her legs. She gazed down at the ground with a dark look.

“Baby Tyrant,” she whispered, motioning for him to come closer. Her bird eyes looked shiny and vulnerable. Baby Tyrant pushed his ear against her cupped hands.

“What about the w——?” Her windy voice cut out.

He grimaced, then leaned closer. “What about the what, kid?” he asked.

“The w-i-c-h-es,” she said, whispering.

*Sandwiches?* No, Baby Tyrant understood what Lizzy meant. He nodded his head. The witches were one of Lizzy’s current preoccupations. Witches, Satan, evil spirits, evil tree spirits, green aliens who lived on windowsills—all of them formed the front end of the never-ending list of Lizzy’s worries. Baby Tyrant licked his index finger and raised it in the air like a weather vane. He looked up towards the sky.

“I have a feeling,” he said, still holding his finger in the air, then moving it erratically to the left, “that they will not be out today.” Baby Tyrant blew what Lizzy imagined to be magic from his finger like dust.

“Okay,” Lizzy said, nodding in approval. “You can go now.”

She continued kicking her legs, a bit too violently, against the old stone fence, and though she frowned like a creature scorned, Baby Tyrant made his way back up the hill towards his most pressing preoccupation.

“You stay right there,” he called back over his shoulder. “I have a surprise for you.”
Lizzy watched Baby Tyrant walk up the gravel path, which looped back towards the farmhouse, until he disappeared. She doubted there would be a surprise. That’s what he had said the last time he left her alone. Waiting on the fence, Lizzy began to daydream. The last time Baby Tyrant was supposed to be watching her, Lizzy had walked to Devil’s Creek by herself and seen the carcass of the black dog rotting on the limestone boulder that G. J. had named Alligator Rock. The dog smelled bad, and sweet, too, like the stinky cheese that G. J. made Lizzy eat at Christmastime. Come to think of it, the dog looked and smelled similar to the dead cattle that Lizzy had just seen, but the dead dog’s pink tongue lolled out of its mouth, and the fur on its back looked burnt. Lizzy decided the dog had been sacrificed to Satan by witches and wondered, whenever she walked near Devil’s Creek alone, if the witches would burn her on a rock, too. That’s when she started stealing knives from her parents’ silverware drawer and tucking them deep in the large pocket of her lime green rain jacket. One day, she found a big hole in her pocket. She never told her parents about the knives, or the knife hole, but she heard them talking one night.

The light coming from the kitchen at Lizzy’s house appeared soft and glowy that night. Lizzy, who stood near the bathroom in the hallway, crept closer.

“We’re missing three knives,” her mother said, and the whispery words sounded mad. “I know she took them,” she added. “Where else could they be?”

Though Lizzy couldn’t see her mother, she imagined what she must look like, sitting at the kitchen table with her pretty chin bent towards her delicate, prayer-making hands.

“I did the same thing when I was a kid, Sharon. It’s a phase.”
Lizzy heard her father move dishes from the dishwasher to the cabinets. When he closed the machine, it made a sharp, sucking sound. He closed the cabinet softly. Lizzy heard the wooden kitchen chair creak as he settled into it.

“Is drinking twelve packs of beer per night a phase ‘she’ll inherit’ as well?”

Lizzy’s father’s voice sounded nice. Her mother’s voice sounded mean. As long as her father didn’t drink so many beers that he got mad and started to slam dishes around, Lizzy didn’t see how drinking them could hurt anything. She decided to tell her mother about the knives eventually, maybe on her mother’s birthday, or on Sunday when she didn’t have to go to work and looked all shiny and happy.

Lizzy continued kicking the rocks as she listened to Devil’s Creek slither along behind her. She stopped daydreaming to observe the natural world. Small birds swept across her vision, occasionally blue jays, but robins, more often than not. The pumpkin-breasted birds pecked for worms in the mud hole beneath the walnut trees, where Joe’s cattle sought shade and moisture. When a jay landed, the robins scattered away.

The jay’s appearance reminded Lizzy of those days at recess when Deidre, the big, redhead bully stalked onto the playground like a boogygirl. As soon as Deidre appeared, the other children scattered like the birds did, hiding in the small cave created by a row of old tractor tires, or out by the big tree on the other side of the playground. Deidre had long, coarse pigtailst; she used them to lash other children across the cheeks until they cried. She laughed while she did it. Fortunately for Lizzy and the other children, Deidre had been held back a year. Lizzy would be starting the first grade that fall. She would be a big girl, and Deidre would not.
Lizzy kicked a rock loose from the fence she was sitting on and immediately looked around to make sure no adult had seen.

“Sorry, God,” she said, because whether she liked it or not, he saw everything she did.

Still no sign of Baby Tyrant. Lizzy thought he must be very sick and that feeling sick must be especially awful for him because it was his birthday. Then she got angry. Baby Tyrant had promised they would go to the creek, and after what felt to her like an eternity, he still wasn’t back. Lizzy suspected he wasn’t coming back at all. She stared hard at the white, concrete-block farmhouse sitting on the hill. She couldn’t see Baby Tyrant on either of the porches. Her eyes grew dark, even darker than they had earlier, and she wanted to cry.

“I hate you, Baby Tyrant,” she said, spitting on the ground. “You’re a liar,” she screamed, and tears streamed down her face. “I don’t even care if it’s your stupid birthday,” she added.

She stood up on the crumbling fence and spit at the dirt, then pivoted her waders to face Devil’s Creek. Lizzy stuck out her tongue. The air rising from Devil’s Creek tasted thick and bright. She felt a chill, as if from a ghostly presence, and her skin turned to gooseflesh. Lizzy stood beside Devil’s Creek for what seemed like a long time, watching the water, muddy from last night’s storm, flow out in front of her. Lizzy saw flashes of small trees with bright, naked roots as they swirled on the water and down toward the rocks where the dead things looked alive—and also towards Alligator Rock. Lizzy thought more and more about the witches. She began to shake with fear until she became so afraid that she couldn’t stand it anymore.
“Baby Tyrant!” she called. “Baby Tyrant!”

Up at the farmhouse, Baby Tyrant braced himself against the kitchen counter and downed his second mug of whiskey. The world around him looked blurry and seemed to vibrate. He hadn’t eaten anything for breakfast and couldn’t remember what he had eaten the night before. Maintaining his grip on the countertop, he lunged towards the bathroom, flung his head in the general direction of the open toilet, and retched. The red and yellow wisps circled and coiled in upon themselves, pushed upwards, struggled, then doubled back, like large goldfish.

Baby Tyrant wiped the slime from his lips and looked in the mirror. A small trail of vomit glistened on his neck, and deep crow’s feet crinkled around his eyes when he tried to smile.

“Happy birthday to me,” he said, and he drew a cigarette from his pack, his last one, walked towards the kitchen, leaned out the screen door and smoked just as he had that morning before remembering what he had told himself he must absolutely not forget: Lizzy. Though it was his birthday, and he had given himself permission to enjoy the day, he wasn’t too eager to incur the wrath of his son or daughter-in-law. After all, he was part of a family again and there were particular duties, such as making sure his granddaughter didn’t wander off all on her own, that he needed to fulfill. Baby Tyrant’s conscience stung him. His heart thudded as his free hand shot out, searching the kitchen counter behind him for the keys to his truck. He sighed when he heard the metal clank. Keys in hand, he walked out to the gravel parking lot, opened his door with haste, and hopped in, putting the key in the ignition and the truck in drive. His stomach churned.
Baby Tyrant ran back through the screen door to vomit. He left his truck in drive.

From her stone-fence vantage point, Lizzy gazed into the creek. She watched an empty Coke can twirl on the current, disappear, then bob up again to float down and over the nearest waterfall, in an abrupt, double-staccato movement. Lizzy looked clear across Devil’s Creek to the steep, eroded bank on the other side, covered in what she heard her father call weed trees, as well as grasses, real weeds, and black-eyed-Susans. She spotted a blue heron there, resting in the water near the opposite bank. It stood on its spidery legs among creek willows, diagonal from Lizzy. The bird’s long neck looped like a snake’s and its narrow eyes, also serpentine, glowed with opaque, predatory power. The blind-looking intensity of the bird’s gaze frightened Lizzy. She wondered if it knew the witch, if it answered to her.

Suddenly, the heron lifted its massive, blue-gray wings, along with the rest of its body, and flew up to meet the sky. Lizzy shivered. She felt almost certain that the heron had flown away to tell the witch that, she, Lizzy, was standing on the fence beside the creek, alone. Lizzy started to sob, loudly, when Clyde, who she hadn’t seen in a few hours, emerged from the weeds on the opposite bank, about a foot from where the heron had been. Somewhat relieved by the sight of a creature familiar to her, Lizzy began to gesture to Clyde from where she stood on the wall. She waved her arms about like someone asking to be rescued. When Clyde expressed more interest in the creek creatures than in Lizzy, she contemplated crossing the water to seek comfort in the presence of her feline friend. For a moment, Clyde stopped pawing the creek. His eyes met Lizzy’s, and he yowled. Lizzy shot a quick glance over her shoulder. She screamed.
After he finished retching, Baby Tyrant opened the farmhouse door. His truck was gone. His stomach dropped.

“Fuck,” he said. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Baby Tyrant began to run, not along the gravel path, but directly down the hill, where he had left Lizzy sitting on the crumbling fence.

“Lizzy,” he screamed as loudly as he could.

“Lizzy, Lizzy, Lizzy!”

He could see the truck in front of him now. It raged down the hill like a bull. One of its doors swung open. He heard Lizzy screaming.

“Lizzy!” he yelled.

Baby Tyrant’s legs and arms pumped hard in an effort to catch up with the truck.

“Lizzy, MOVE!” he screamed.

*Please hear, me, Lizzy, he prayed. Dear Lord, girl, move!*  

Baby Tyrant managed to keep pace with the metal beast for a few seconds, before falling behind long enough to imagine, and in a less than a second acknowledge, the inevitable.

For a split second after Clyde yowled, Lizzy turned on her heels. She stood on the fence, watching the truck as it barreled toward her. Its doors flew open on their hinges. It moved like a bird with giant wings, like the heron that Lizzy was now certain the witch possessed. Baby Tyrant wasn’t in the driver’s seat. No one was. Lizzy figured the witch
had possessed him, too. Then she saw Baby Tyrant. She saw the truck, and she saw Baby Tyrant chasing after it.

“MOVE!” he hollered. “MOVE!”

Lizzy pivoted and jumped to safety several feet away, as the truck, which Baby Tyrant could not catch, crashed into the fence with a loud popping and banging sound. The segment of fence that Lizzy just vacated, which had stood for over a century, lay in rubble on the ground.

Lizzy stood with her mouth open and her heart pounding. The fumes from the truck’s decimated hood snaked up through the wreckage. When Baby Tyrant saw Lizzy, his eyes grew wide, joyful. He smiled.

“Lizard Gizzard!” he called.

He threw his hands up. Lizzy still couldn’t move. The broken strap of her overall had fallen completely down and one pigtail holder was lost to the mud forever. Baby Tyrant ran toward Lizzy, then inspected her for a good minute, making sure all her necessary parts were still where they needed to be and working, before lifting her high in his arms and whooping a few good times like King Kong. Still holding Lizzy, he looked up towards the sunny heavens to thank God that he had not killed his son’s only child.

Lizzy, who Baby Tyrant held like a rag doll, cocked her head to the side and looked at grandfather’s face in disbelief. She wriggled to be let down. Baby Tyrant set her down. Now he had really lost it; she wondered if her mother would take him to the hospital that evening. From the other side of the creek, Clyde cocked his head as well, lost in similar thoughts. When Baby Tyrant stopped gesticulating, his gaze fell upon his truck once more and he frowned. He looked across the bank at Clyde, then back at his
truck, before blasting Clyde with a dark look, as if the whole affair were his fault. Clyde welcomed the look. He flicked his tail, hungry for sardines.

As Baby Tyrant’s mood shifted from joy to anger, Lizzy began to think dark thoughts of her own. The creek witch had come for Baby Tyrant, possessed him and his truck, and used them to try and kill her. As the knowledge registered, Lizzy began to shake, and then, without wasting another minute, took two steps forward and ran towards the farmhouse. Clyde, who saw the direction Lizzy was headed, made a quick dash across the creek to catch up with Lizzy and began to prance along at her heels. Sometimes Lizzy ate sardines, too.

Around this time, Sharon, who Joe had alerted about G. J.’s delayed plane, pulled her gray Corolla through the farm gate with G. J. in tow. Though Sharon still felt angry with her mother-in-law after the last incident and blamed her, to a certain extent, for Baby Tyrant’s recklessness, she had decided to forgive G. J., and perhaps even Baby Tyrant, if only on his birthday.

Sharon turned to G. J.

“I wonder what Lizzy and Baby Tyrant have been up to,” she said. “I told Lizzy to make him a card. I never know if she’ll do as I say. I suppose she’s a lot like her grandfather in that regard.”

G. J. smiled. “She’s certainly strong-willed,” she said. As they passed through the gate, Sharon saw the mangled truck. Her chest tightened, along with her jaw. She clenched her fists. Sharon hadn’t felt this angry since the last time Baby Tyrant screwed up. Sharon had resolved to forgive Baby Tyrant, but maternal
anger flooded her body with adrenaline. Her brain became hot magma. She rolled down G. J.’s window, as well as her own. G. J. gulped. Sharon glowered directly at Baby Tyrant. Her volcano eyes belched anger.

He stood by his truck, smoking. Lizzy was alive, and that was good enough for him.

Without speaking, Sharon gestured for Baby Tyrant to come closer. He did.

“Where’s my daughter?” she hissed.

G. J. stepped in. “Is Lizzy all right, dear?” she asked. She clutched the passenger door.

Baby Tyrant, who couldn’t deny that the situation was a bad one, pointed to the top of the hill.

“She took off towards the house,” he said.

Without speaking, Sharon closed both windows, glared at G. J. ferociously and sped up the hill.

“I can’t believe he did this again!” Sharon said.

G. J. took in the farm from her window, including the ominous presence of the dead cattle, which Sharon missed. She spoke to Sharon without turning her head.

“He’s an alcoholic, Sharon. What do you expect?” Tears rolled down G. J.’s cheeks. After her long delay, she felt old, tired, and a bit helpless.

“I expect much better when he’s watching my child,” Sharon said.

Gravel flew as she went. Upon spotting the cat-child caravan, she put the car in park, opened the door, and got out. Tears streamed down Lizzy’s face. Sharon ran to her daughter, patted her hair, kissed her cheek, and pressed Lizzy’s small, sweaty body
against her large dry one. For a moment, she stood, holding her daughter, who still cried, and gazing across Devil’s Creek with a thunderclap look. Baby Tyrant would never watch her daughter again.

Sharon secured Lizzy in her booster seat. Lizzy whimpered and cried. “I’ll make you some chocolate milk when we get back to the house,” Sharon said. In the back seat, Lizzy sniffled but seemed to accept the proposition.

G. J., who wanted to exhibit normal adult behavior so that Lizzy wouldn’t be further upset, peered over her shoulder at Lizzy and smiled.

“How’s G. J.’s sweet girl?” she asked. “I bought you some new pastels in Michigan. I know you’ll like them.” Lizzy sniffed but started to smile. Perhaps it was Baby Tyrant’s birthday, but she would be the one getting all the attention and presents today.

“What kind of pastels?” she asked.

When Sharon opened the farmhouse door, lamplight washed over the kitchen counter, revealing an empty glass bottle, which cast a long shadow across the floor. The smell of cigarette smoke lingered in the air, and the humidity-bloated bathroom door hung half-open, half-closed. The room smelled like vomit. Sharon sat Lizzy on the kitchen counter. She turned to G. J.

“Look at what he’s done,” Sharon said. “He’s been drinking and made himself sick.”

Sharon fixed her mother-in-law with an indignant look. “Please watch Lizzy while I clean this mess up,” she said.

G. J. nodded her head in agreement. “You know, Sharon…” she started to say.
But Sharon cut her off.

“Oh no, you will not be making any more apologies for him,” she said.

She grabbed a roll of paper towels from the kitchen counter and wiped up some of the mess before storming off to the bathroom.

When she opened the bathroom door, Sharon saw small dribbles of blood and what seemed to be snot, oozing down the edges of the toilet. She shook her head.

“Oh, Baby Tyrant,” she said. “You do not know the wrath of a mother enraged.”

She cleaned the vomit and snotty substance away with more paper towels, so that Lizzy wouldn’t see. In the kitchen, Lizzy kicked her feet as she had done earlier in the day and looked up at the wooden attic where cobwebs thrived, and where she had long suspected that the evil spirits lived. G. J. brushed Lizzy’s hair back from her face and started to braid it.

“I’m sorry that Baby Tyrant left you again,” she said in a grave tone.

Lizzy shrugged her shoulders.

“I still love him,” she said.

“I know you do,” G. J. replied, but there was something odd in her voice. Lizzy didn’t like it.

After Sharon gave her a bath, Lizzy, who still felt shaken and cold, plunged beneath her covers, drew the itchy woolen blankets up past her neck until they covered her face, then shut her eyes so tight that they hurt.

“Dear Lord,” she prayed. “I know Baby Tyrant smokes and farts and drinks all the time, but it’s his birthday, so please don’t let the witches burn him on a rock. Amen.”
Lizzy paused. “And don’t let them burn me on a rock either,” she added. “Amen,” she repeated, keeping her eyes shut and slept.

Upon awaking, about an hour later, Lizzy threw the covers back from her face, sprung out of bed, sunk into her waders, and walked outside. She had always hated the sensation of the world going on without her. The porch provided a panoramic view of the farm. Lizzy turned and turned in an attempt to take in all the wondrous natural bounties of the sunset and the birds and the trees. She turned and turned, small pivots taken on rubber soles, until she stopped, gazed at the spot where the truck still smoked. A shiny black tow truck had come to take the maroon pickup away.

“Good riddance, old maroon poop truck,” Lizzy said. She wondered if the wrecker had come to tow Baby Tyrant away too.

In the kitchen, Sharon, who had determined to perform her duty as a daughter-in-law even when other family members did not fulfill their most basic responsibilities, chopped vegetables for a relish tray and fried thin hamburgers in the skillet. Lizzy, who had been given permission to do whatever she wanted for the rest of the evening, tapped her mother on the shoulder. Sharon turned away from the stovetop.

“Mama,” Lizzy asked. “Are we still going to have the surprise?”

Sharon held her hand on her ample hip, and arched her neck back slightly, looking at the ceiling.

“I think Baby Tyrant’s had enough surprises for one day,” she finally answered. “But we all have to eat,” she added.

Lizzy, whose pigtails had been restored, and also braided, bobbed her head up and down. She thought she understood what her mother meant. They would still have a party,
she decided, but only if Baby Tyrant wanted one, and only if he wasn’t possessed by the witch anymore.

Lizzy sat at the kitchen table with her face in her hands, staring into Baby Tyrant’s birthday card. G. J., who didn’t know what to do, placed her palm between Lizzy’s shoulder blades.

“What a lovely card, dear” she said.

Lizzy didn’t reply, but instead, burrowed her face into her grandmother’s neck and breathed in her perfume. It always made her feel better. It had the last time Baby Tyrant did something bad.

Later that night, the surprise did happen. Kind of. After they ate dinner, Baby Tyrant sprayed Lizzy with the hose. Wearing one of his old t-shirts, she pirouetted and skipped through the water, glowing with pure creature joy. When no one was looking, Baby Tyrant gave Clyde a healthy splattering as well. Sharon had brought her pie and fixed the food, as promised. She was the kind of woman who always held up her end of the deal, no matter the circumstances, but she spoke very little to anyone, except Lizzy. She blamed Joe. She blamed G. J. She blamed Baby Tyrant, of course. But, mostly, she blamed herself for entrusting her child to a man who couldn’t remember to feed himself.

When Sharon uncovered the pie, Lizzy suggested that they all sing “Happy Birthday” to Baby Tyrant. Baby Tyrant sat at the table, eating his pie before anyone else got theirs. Oh, how he loved coconut-cream pie. Before Lizzy suggested that they sing, she ran into the bathroom and used G. J.’s lipstick to make blood stains around her mouth and unbraided her hair so that she resembled the monster version of herself she had
drawn on Baby Tyrant’s birthday card. Monster makeover complete, Lizzy seated herself at the table, right next to Baby Tyrant who saw her makeup and snorted. She picked up the card from the table and held it in her hand. Sharon shook her head at Lizzy’s hair. G. J. grinned. Joe leaned out the screen door to smoke a cigarette, and Clyde seized upon the opportunity to enter the house. He scurried under the table, sat on his haunches, and purred.

Lizzy called to Joe from the table.

“Daddy, we’re about to sing,” she said.

Joe grunted then closed the door.

“Happy birthday to you,” Lizzy began. “Happy birthday to you,” she continued. “Happy birthday, Baby Tyrant…”

Joe grumbled the words. G. J. sung them in her flat Jazz singer’s voice, and Sharon shaped her mouth around the words without saying them at all. Sharon glared at Baby Tyrant, who smiled back at her, the edges of his mouth sticky with merengue. During the singing, Baby Tyrant accidentally stepped on Clyde’s tail beneath the table. The cat yowled before running into the living room to pee on G. J.’s other Persian rug. Baby Tyrant laughed. Lizzy clapped her hands. Sharon shook her head, pulling Joe aside.

“You’re in deep shit,” she said. “Our daughter could’ve been killed.”

“We’ll talk about this when we get home,” he said. He tried to wrap his arms around Sharon’s waist, but she drew back.

“I am not leaving this house without my daughter.”

“You’re the one who wants another kid,” Joe said. “Besides, Mom’s here now. Everything will be all right.” Joe kissed Sharon’s hair, and this time, perhaps because she
was ovulating, or perhaps because she actually believed him, Sharon accepted his affections.

After the festivities ended, Baby Tyrant hung his birthday card on the wall, above a plate, like a piece of art. Though Sharon still wanted to take Lizzy home right away, Lizzy reminded her mother that she had agreed that she could do anything she wanted for the rest of the evening. Lizzy, convinced that Baby Tyrant was no longer possessed, did not want to go home.

“Yeah, honey, don’t want to go back on your word,” Joe said.

Lizzy shook her head enthusiastically.

Sharon bent down to kiss her daughter’s forehead. She made eye contact with G. J.

“You watch Lizzy,” she said.

“Of course I’ll watch her,” G. J. said. She used her reassuring English teacher voice to assuage her daughter-in-law’s fears. It seemed to work.

Sharon grabbed her pie pan.

Lizzy hugged Joe at the knees. He patted her head, and the couple left, holding hands.

After Baby Tyrant put Lizzy to bed, because she insisted, he drank a shot of whisky, lay down on the brown leather couch, and fell asleep watching TV and snoring with his yellow toenails and callouses propped up on the couch arm, exposed.

G. J. slept in the big bed, alone, and Lizzy, who watched the spirits of the dead stretch long and ragged on the ceiling, couldn’t sleep at all. She rolled down her
prodigious, Princess and the Pea covers and tiptoed into the living room to gaze at Baby Tyrant as he slept. Even in sleep, his face seemed tired. He gnashed his yellow, cigarette-stained teeth together like an old dog. Lizzy noted that his breath stank like one’s too. She also noted the way he screeched his teeth, snored, then breathed quietly, before starting the whole process again. From this, Lizzy gleaned that snoring seemed to happen in cycles and carefully monitored the narrowing and expansion of Baby Tyrant’s nostrils that led to his characteristic foghorn blasts, and relished the small, predictable bouts of quiet in between. When Baby Tyrant’s nostrils slurped at the air softly, she petted the fine, thinning hair on the crown of his head and tried to smooth the deep lines in his forehead with her small, pink hands in the same way the creek smoothed things. It made the rocks soft and the leaves and the bones of the dead cattle that plopped their feverish bodies down on the cool creek bed and never rose again. The water made everything soft.

Baby Tyrant never stirred, but, similar to the creek’s soft, deep-churning percussion, the predictable cycles of noise his body emitted soothed Lizzy. As long as an adult continued to live, sleep, and snore, Lizzy knew that nothing truly bad could happen to her. Comforted, she pushed her body up from the cold, concrete floor, pressing her palms into the cool leather near Baby Tyrant’s head. Mid-crouch, she noticed a small photograph of a pretty woman, who was not G. J., lying near Baby Tyrant’s jean pocket. Lizzy’s heart fluttered. Without breathing, she took the photo in her hands, and held it like a surprise.

The young woman in the photo wore a red and white polka-dotted bikini. She had big blond hair, red lips, and blue eyes that shined like perfect skies. In the blue-tinted TV light, her white smile gleamed headlight bright, and large, like a horse’s. A forest of
dried-up palm trees appeared behind her, and a blue sky arched over her, free of clouds. The woman’s breasts, which Lizzy struggled to stop ogling, looked like two hard candies that had been super-glued onto the woman’s chest. Very gently, Lizzy tucked the picture back into Baby Tyrant’s pocket, alongside a lopsided pile of two nickels and a dime, and went to bed. She felt embarrassed, right down to the soles of her creek-smelling feet, but didn’t know why—and then she became afraid.

Like the shadows that stretched over her bed, dark thoughts the texture of black taffy, or long fingers of turgid water, spooled out from the dark corners of the world to wrap tighter and tighter circles around Lizzy’s trembling, fist-sized heart. Baby Tyrant might look like Baby Tyrant, but he wasn’t the same person anymore. The woman in the photo was a witch who had cast a spell on him. When he didn’t obey her every whim, she made him to do bad things, like drink too much and crash his truck into trees and fences. That’s why Baby Tyrant looked so sick and tired all the time. Sure, the witch was young and pretty, but Lizzy knew, from watching Hocus Pocus, that such women, simultaneously witchy and beautiful, could, and did, exist in the world.

Buzzing with the adrenaline of her latest discovery, Lizzy snuck into G.J.’s bedroom, and more quietly than the Sandman, opened the top drawer where G. J. kept her bras and other bra-related devices. In the dark, Lizzy swept her hand over the contents of the drawer, in search of the distinct jelly jiggle of G. J.’s inserts. She often watched her grandmother dress. She watched her apply makeup, jewelry, hairspray, and perfume. On several occasions, especially when G.J. wore dresses that hung down low, Lizzy had witnessed her grandmother deposit the soft, fatty lumps in her bra, underneath her breasts.
Lizzy put the jelly inserts beneath her shirt, near her own breasts, stood before the mirror in the bathroom, and jiggled her fake chest around like a grown-up woman. With enough practice, she might become a witch, too.

In the comfort of their suburban home, Joe and Sharon struggled to create another child.

“Can’t you move around a little more?” Joe asked.

Even in the dark, he discerned the black aura of Sharon’s glare.

“I am not doing any more work today,” she said. “Of any kind,” she added.

Joe sighed, not in ecstasy, but in quiet concession.

She never makes anything easy, he decided and continued to pump. Salt, ocean-thick, gathered on his brow, as Sharon lay below him, as regal and lithic as a queen of yore.

Devil’s creek surged in the distance, still swollen and crooked with wreckage and rain. Clyde pawed at the creek. He caught two minnows that night, which, to his sophisticated pallet, tasted terrible. They tasted like the creek and everything in it, both seen and unseen.