

EXPOSURES

A Thesis

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By

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Preface

It is my aim to provide a context for this short novel in order for the reading experience to be more enjoyable and for the departures from narrative convention to be more permissible. Exposures employs sentence fragments, stream of consciousness, lyric interludes, roving omniscience, shifts in verb tense, and figurative language, but it is a realist novel invested in character. I am going to praise books and art in equal measure in this preface. Libraries and museums are the last public spaces of secular worship intended to bring humans together in quiet reflection on the fundamental questions preoccupying the thinking mind: What is love? What is goodness? What is transcendence? Tell me truth. Performing arts, ones with high admissions fees and acquired tastes, eschew access in favor of cachet. But you could very reasonably expect to read a beautiful book at the library for free. Books are democratic and provide us with the happy illusion that if we only keep reading we can live all lives. Art, meanwhile, forces us to confront the distance between dream and reality. We cannot inhabit art in the same robust multisensory way as a novel, a form that tasks its audience with imagining.

Virginia Woolf's use of stream of consciousness and language in *To the Lighthouse* made a deep impression on me as a reader. Notably, Woolf combines stream of consciousness with roving omniscience. In a fresh way, Rachel Cusk communicates her characters' impressions and thoughts in language, too. Interiority interests me as fiction, unlike visual mediums, excels at capturing thinking. While Poppy's character arc (trapped in the house; escaped from the house - trapped mentally; committing the ultimate betrayal - consummating the ultimate love; returning to confront her true self in the house - released mentally) shape the novel, other perspectives exist beside hers. Poppy's perspective overwhelms one's tolerance for melodrama without a balance of other sensibilities to temper her heightened reactions. Recently, a spate of novels documenting love affairs from women's perspectives have appeared, and two in particular accomplish everything I should wish to

accomplish: Lisa Halliday's *Asymmetry* and Sally Rooney's *Conversations With Friends*, written with blasé attitudes and fluid sentences. Though I am currently the same age as the author of the aforementioned book, perhaps I do not have the wherewithal to grapple with Poppy's character, or, more accurately, perhaps I do not have the appropriate narrative sensibility as mine eschews ironic distance in favor of earnestness and lyric intensity.

James Salter's novel *Light Years*, which ranges between past and present tense to make manifest on a line-to-line basis the warp of time and index Viri's decline, provided me with a model for shifting between verb tenses with intention. At different points in the writing process, I attempted to migrate the whole project into the past tense, but, ultimately, it became clear that certain paragraphs needed to remain in past tense, others in present tense. Similarly, the codeswitching between English and Spanish captures the linguistic fluidity prevalent in the foreign space Poppy inhabits out of birthright and of her own accord as an adult. Junot Diaz, grotty and jubilant in his phrasings, was a model for peppering Spanish into fiction.

As much as linguistic frisson and texture fuels my work, Mavis Gallant's embedding of meaning in imagery and Eudora Welty's reckless figurative language were formative for me as a writer, as were the love and wisdom that suffuses their characterizations; they see straight into the hearts of their creations. In a similar vein, Clarice Lispector's galvanic wildness and disfiguration of language excite me, as do her uncanny insights into longing and love. "I am not an intellectual," Lispector writes, "I write with my body. Coherence, I don't want it anymore. Coherence is mutilation. I want disorder." While I sympathize with Lispector's words, I hope for coherence, especially in fiction. Moreover, this is the area I most seek to improve: clarity, order. Still, the natures of these characters warrant a complicated presentation of ethics that shirks definitiveness in favor of mutability and supplants order with variability.

More recently, I encountered Jenny Erpenbeck's novel *The End of the Days*, which weaves together different versions of the same story, entangling novel form and human fate. The book is a masterclass in maintaining believability and emotional stakes while manipulating the familiar architecture of the novel. Admittedly, an over-reliance on imagery and metaphor causes shabbiness in scenes and skittish pacing in my novel(a). In more recent drafts, I have attempted to loosen the language of this book, which at times reads overly pressurized, unpalatably so. I have always admired aphoristic writers like Henry David Thoreau, who writes sentences with bold, unsubstantiated claims about the broader world and in doing so foregrounds his narrator. The earnestness of Thoreau's writing and his crotchety antipathy toward society fill me with joy. His is a vision of nonconformity no longer possible, hemmed in as it is by his limited conception of American society, but his insistence on transcendence, his reverence for nature, and his search for a nuanced vessel of the divine in the everyday remain touchstones for seeking habitual grace.

I often prefer essays over fiction. There is a quality to certain fiction which announces itself as fiction: e.g., "Tom strode out of the room," that I find irritating. In contrast, the essay never purports to tell anything but the truth and never degrades itself by communicating via stilted fiction language, which is at best boring and at worst enervating. John Berger, Adam Gopnik, Zadie Smith, Rebeca Solnit, Geoff Dyer and Marilynne Robinson all write beautiful essays. I often turn to essays over fiction because essays wear their heart on their sleeve, to borrow a cliché, and risk vulnerability without the ironic distance afforded by fiction. I love the intimate voice that characterizes the essay form, a voice that gives one the impression that the narrator is speaking directly to the reader, foregrounding the author's attempt at communication and displaying vulnerability much to the reader's pleasure. Essayists pivot frequently between literature, art, life, and the historical record—all are beautiful, all are painful. I love the name dropping in essays and the abundant references to other

artists and writers that tangles one further in a web of reading and discovery. I love the way essays make one feel actively involved in a human conversation spanning centuries recorded in books.

These writers account for literary influences but equally important to this project are artistic influences. There is no time I feel as attendant to being a subject in relation to other entities hemmed in by my own witnessing of their existence as when I am standing before a piece of art in a hall with high ceilings, purposefully high ceilings so as to allow sufficient headspace for the volume of flighty thoughts and aspirations released in response to a confrontation with beauty. I have never felt more known and knowing than when standing before art (be it literature, performing, or visual) and perhaps this is what people mean when they refer to the sublime. I do not know, but think, we are awed by an experience of beauty when we deem a creation lasting and infinite: the sky, the ocean, the Grand Canyon, an enormous marble amphitheater, or a masterpiece painting. This makes the erosion or human marks visible in great works of art all the more appealing—the cigarette ash in a Jackson Pollack (how breath and smoke track time) or the demarcation of geological eras in the Grand Canyon (how wind and sand track time) or the abraded stone longing for the missing arm on a female torso from antiquity. That we can go to a museum and see a Mark Rothko in the same context as an Ancient Greek statue of Aphrodite, a Mayan calendar, or an Egyptian Fayum portrait startles us not so much as the kindred reactions they all spark as objects of devotion.

At the Museum of Fine Arts there has long been a zesty abstract painting by Willem de Kooning on the first floor, and, recently, they placed a work of similar size, color, and abstraction by Elaine de Kooning, his wife and fellow painter, on the adjacent wall. The paintings reside in the same corner and the images communicate with one another as one imagines the artists communicated as lovers and friends. You recognize that the one could not have existed without the other, that these paintings exist in erotic interrelation. What is spoken in one is responded to in the other. They belong together on either side of where two walls meet, hanging on the wall like two

paragraphs in one book, one following the other, one giving meaning to the other and vice versa. This example makes explicit (charges visually) the energy that exists between all works of art—the communication of love, desire, ideas, and suffering. Museums free us not to judge the world but to thank it for its manifold experiences of beauty.

For a long time, the color blue has fascinated me as it once did the French artist Yves Klein, who has a series of works that immerse various materials in vivid blue. In his painting “People Begin to Fly,” he uses the female body as a paintbrush, dipping humans into paint and positioning them against his canvas so the overall effect is imprints in blue of the nude female figure attempting flight. His use of the profane (the body) to attain transcendence (flight) seems an apt metaphor for the process of the writer, who takes the mundane material of everyday existence and attempts to create flight by arranging these strivings on the page. The renowned rebel-rousers and artists Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, Graciela Iturbide, and Anna Halprin who worked, respectively, in painting, performance, photography, and dance influenced these pages, too. These artists positioned the female body in violent and erotic contexts, oftentimes documenting the body as a site for artistic transgression within nature. These women, like Sappho, have been seminal to my understanding of the body’s role in transgressive art.

Additionally, I have been thinking for some time now about photography as a metaphor for exposure and capture and how the mechanics and grammar of imagery influence Poppy, herself a photographer compelled by images. I am interested in photographs for the illusion they create of stopped time. They are life arrested. Photographs evoke the moment before and the moment after the image. What makes some works of art resonate throughout time? Why is it that certain words though written hundreds of years ago continue to communicate with our deepest self and be felt immediately? Or, more to the point, why are we writing or making or using words in this heightened

way? There is a continually frustrated desire for exact communication, transcendent beauty, supreme understanding and sheer grace at stake.

Finally, Toni Morrison's work inflects on this project both for its melding of high modernist techniques with conventional plots and for her daring rewriting of the fallen woman trope. Morrison depicts the happenstance, folly, and bliss of illicit desire, a compassionate gesture considering the bleak legacy of fallen women in literature from Madame Bovary to Anna Karenina to Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier. It was my explicit intention not to seek moral comeuppance for Poppy or punish her transgressions. I have emotional sympathy for her; I created and understand her, though I know she could not exist outside of the fictional world in which she takes shape. Paradoxically, her boldness and vivacity comprise her destruction and vice. This book is her character's world to a large extent, and the language and imagery on the page often belong to her interior landscape. The vivid language works to this project's detriment and benefit, and my wish is for future drafts to be written more plainly. I worry about a false conflation between high emotional stakes and heightened language. Things stated simply carry more charge. For example, if someone says "I love you" that is more powerful than "I truly love you" which carries the cloud of the unneeded modifier truly. If there are passages here that are over-written or that assume ridiculous diction, I hope these serve as generative practice.

I thought critically about borders while writing this novel, borders between humans and nation-states and the ways both are constantly shifting, how this uncertainty causes humans to fear transgressions and boundary crossings between nations and individuals. Poppy transgresses geographically and interpersonally. Boundaries are beautiful. They create order and meaning and separate self from other. However, in today's sociopolitical climate where the wealthy move fluidly across borders both intimate and geographical while the lower classes are demobilized from crossing in various ways, the ethics of the border have changed substantially. Who gets to cross lines and

why? I worry sometimes that books are a way to escape (rather than praise or honor) life, though I feel that I have lived many lives through writing the character of Poppy.

The genesis for this project began with me posing the question: What type of person acts on illicit desires? How does she love and behave? That was how I found Poppy, whose vice gives the novel its motor, and, later, Athena, whose goodness gives the narrative its heart and abets Poppy's final act of destruction. Athena, whose name signifies wisdom and war, having sprung from the head of Zeus fully formed, provides moral rectitude, hope, and balance. I hope this critical preface softens the pages that are to follow or at least makes them intelligible. In teaching fiction, it becomes clear that if there is a meaning present on the page students readily intuit it if the path has been paved smoothly by the writer. May the path be smooth. May the end leave the reader somewhere distant from where they started, having arrived, finally, at meaning.

I would not think to touch the sky with two arms.
—Sappho

*A not admitting of the wound
Until it grew so wide
That all my Life had entered it*
—Emily Dickinson

*My eyes were such that literally they
Took photographs.*
—Vladimir Nabokov

1 *Santa Monica*

Poppy's sister Athena drove Poppy to get her abortion. Athena sat in the waiting room snacking with a thirty-two weeks' pregnant woman who ate an almond & coconut granola bar with prolonged, chewy proficiency. Athena spoke with a gorgeous lisp like flakes of crackers permanently lodged in the roof of her mouth. Gelled. Her conversation like peanut butter and, yet, we must underscore that despite her blurred enunciation she was: headstrong, capable, forthright. Outside the clinic Poppy had paused to destroy a cluster of dandelions. She could not resist the perfect o of her lips setting free the flecks of white. Released, she opens her hand.

"I can tell you right now you're perfect," Athena said inside the waiting room. The woman chewed. Poppy was fifteen. There was still something girlish about her. She was romantic and shy and sweet, not naïve, but believing in things still. She gave one the feeling that if you blew firmly on her something soft and unprotected would float off in the wind. Like a dandelion. Poppy had gotten an email telling her what to expect on the day of her abortion. The instructions weren't sent in advance to explain what she would see. They were sent to explain all she would not see. Poppy climbed into a hospital bed healthy: *all of us are walking around with enormous WOUNDS*. A nurse with purple glasses and freckles monitored the pulse. Poppy listened to a Spanish love song on her earphones.

A warm man with stitches pushed Poppy around in bed. Poppy's stomach cramped like love or illness, exposing tender twist ties around her heart, and the doctor was tightening them, the poky ends were bristling in her chest, closing, closing. "This won't hurt," the doctor had said, her face red and scrubbed like a good pan for cooking things. It was a lie.

Poppy shivered like the doctor's hands were running through her hair. Poppy liked that she lied to her. "You have pretty eyes," Poppy said. The doctor used her eyes like a light switch, flipping on and off human hearts. Poppy in her paper gown admired the doctor's delicate hair, pale hands, blue eyes. The procedure was fast: the whoosh and succinct heart-stop of a sneeze, delicious in its tang, its preview of death.

Poppy imagined Athena in the waiting room uncapping a rollerball to fill out the crossword of a magazine. Athena should know better than to fill out the crossword of a doctor's office magazine. She would wait until Athena left the waiting room and rip it out. She was sitting in stirrups, which wore fuzzy socks, running her forefingers beneath her eyes to ensure her black eyeliner wasn't smudging down. The ends of her bellbottom jeans were ragged, too long. No one would take her seriously. People kept interrupting her. Men kept interrupting her. She would not sit on public restroom seats. People thought she was rude, but she wasn't rude. She was trying to make herself into a person.

Poppy emerged with eyeliner smeared hands, took Athena's palm shelled in hers and pulled. "It was nice talking to you," thirty-two weeks called after Athena, her voice a tossed away wrapper or the static swish of a departing skirt.

At home that night, Poppy brought her hands to her face and the smell of her fingers nauseated her. They smelled like abortion. There was a bottle of Febreze in the drawer with her soccer cleats. She sprayed her hands in Febreze, dowsing her deeds in Cool Breeze. Her underwear bloomed blood. Poppy crammed them with her homecoming corsage into a shoebox and threw the bundle away outdoors, reaching her hand into the orifice toward the bottom of the trash bin.

"What's wrong with you?" Poppy's father said Sunday morning after she hadn't left

her room all weekend. Athena had never said: “Let’s not tell Dad,” but Poppy worried that A) her father knew she was sexually active; B) her father knew she was dumb enough to have sex without protection; C) her father knew she had had an abortion. Whenever her father closed the fridge and beamed at her with a post-workout chocolate milk in hand, she sang these ABC’s.

“Hey booger,” he said Monday. Poppy elbowed her mug onto the floor.

“She’s not going to make it,” he joked.

During the procedure, Athena tore a sheet out of the magazine with a coupon for lawn fertilizer and Poppy’s phone pinged with a text from her best friend Sara. Poppy could not tell Sara the truth, she could not tell anyone, except Athena the truth, not even her beloved father. She did not respond to Sara’s text.

Athena was princess-y. She squealed at lizards. Poppy squealed at nothing. Poppy was in love with the weirdos of the world, even the disgusting ones, and considered people to be mistaken about what constituted coolness in humans. She felt intimidated by no one, not out of naiveté at the dangers of life but out of a borderline pathological ease inside predicaments of extreme danger and inhumanity. Poppy bore on the inside of her forearm a gorgeous-cum-hideous birth mark of no discernable or endearing shape, a tumble-weeding blob inside her right elbow, which identified her to strangers in Santa Monica as the girl abducted at age seven and kept in an abandoned house for three days by a man now completing a life sentence locked in what (Poppy imagines) to be a hideous trap this time not of his own devising. Ah, hardening, dark secret! Exposed on the front page of the Los Angeles Times. Was she? *I don’t know.*

(We don’t know. Let us see.)

A retinue of professionals of the medical and law enforcement varieties posed a series of questions to recreate the events that unfolded during the seventy-two hours of Poppy's captivity, in answer to which seven-year-old Poppy repeatedly shook her head: NO. She would disclose nothing. Poppy's family never referred directly to the event thereafter and discouraged indirect references to their youngest's abduction amongst their circle of friends through a series of questionable hedges and conversational acrobatics. It was as if Poppy's family, finally, at a loss of understanding and unwilling to play a perverse what-if-game involving their own child, and, perhaps more accurately, unable to withstand the guilt of having failed to prevent her abduction from a crowded neighborhood relay race, settled on adopting Poppy's seven-year-old approach to the situation: "NO," they resisted, donning an obstinate tone in response to overtures of compassion. For Poppy's parents the contours of the event wore a trim shape: three days in which they bore the absence of their daughter bravely, if with an appropriate display of paternal grief, after which they surfaced. That is to say, their breathing resumed normal rhythms. In contrast, Poppy's experience of those three days does not subscribe to any enclosed temporal frame. The circumference of her abduction does not circumscribe itself to any recognizable or familiar shape. Images of those three days transpose themselves over every single day of her life.

We don't know. Can she breathe?

The drawers smelled. What seemed sincere turned sinister. Tourists in their too-short shorts. People stepping over homeless folks. Parents shrieking at their children in the hot sun. There was nothing. It was putrid. Unbearable to be in skin. She would be disengaged. Uninterested. Poppy started stealing small things. The first time she stole was an accident; she took something from the counter and stuck it in her purse before the cashier rang it up.

He eyed her purse but said nothing.

Poppy's mother was a recovered alcoholic who attended AA meetings and had worked as a nurse in Oncology until retiring at forty-three. She wore fanny packs as she Swiffered her linoleum. She had been a catastrophic thinker (flat tire: end of the world), until a diagnosis of breast cancer caused her to reassess her criteria for determining what constituted the end of the world. Poppy's father owned a series of telescopes which he pulled out to watch the stars beside the family's snappy terrier, Comet.

There was a wall facing the bookshelf with a collection of crosses: wrought iron, silver, wooden, hand-carved, ornate, bleeding, Jesus, floral filigreed, gold leaf, plain. These gory and glorious figures were her mother's precious arrangements, dusted with a microfiber cloth on Wednesdays, the silver polished in yellow gloves on Sundays. Her mother owned a large loom on which she wove hideous pastel wall hangings. They owned a pet bunny rabbit. Poppy's bathroom connected to her older sister Athena's who played cello in orchestra and "tried" to kill herself on an overdose of Tylenol in 11th grade after her boyfriend left her for the school's star trumpet player Ella, whom Athena referred to as "that strumpet Ella."

In Catholic school, the nuns played videos on abortion for Poppy's religion studies class. They showed gruesome methods of killing babies, outdated ways of crushing live skulls, forceps mangling brains and clamping organs, and nefarious extractions. God's glory, Poppy would never know. Many of Poppy's girlfriends did not believe in God. Their spiritual practice consisted of smoking American Spirits outside Starbucks. Poppy played with dolls until she was twelve. It wasn't that she was slow to grow up. It was that she was practicing for a baby.

Poppy had pierced something sacred, precious as the Eucharist kept in the elaborate gold emblazoned sunshining box on the altar, a secret, sacred thing transformed into flesh. It's not that Poppy stopped believing. It's that if she continued to believe, she could not live in herself.

There was another reason for not telling Poppy's father and that was because the father of Poppy's aborted baby was his partner at the law firm. Sitting in the sun as her shoulders burned, kissing Mr. Lindley while smelling of her mother's bubbly, champagne colored perfume, Poppy admired and disliked him. He took a twisted string and straightened it out and made it legible. She was comforted. She longed to lay her head in his hands and ask him to untwist the tangles of her mind.

They had met when Poppy babysat for the Lindleys. When the Lindleys walked out the door, Poppy stood akimbo for a moment watching the children love on their mother. His daughter Ainsley had nightmares and Poppy sat in the hall listening for her. Poppy had gone into Ainsley's mother's bathroom and opened her drawers, admiring the special racks and hooks for earrings, headbands, assorted sized makeup wands. She smelled powder and floral perfumes set atop a doily sized mirror. She sat in the enormous tub in her sock feet. Downstairs she wiped down the granite counters until she saw her face in the reflection: until the counters gleamed. She sat in the quiet house. She did not turn the television on; she did not rifle through the stack of celebrity gossip magazines kept in a kitchen cupboard with sippy cups; she did not use the restroom. She sat in the same spot trying to leave the lightest imprint possible in the beautiful velveteen sofa, soft and pink. Before the Lindleys left, Mr. Lindley would hand out riddles and parcel out fables to Poppy like a brandy best savored alone in the lamp light of a dark house.

“There was a queen captivated by a beautiful gold pin. She was blind to everything in the world but the draw of the dazzling trinket. She felt allure but understood nothing.” This was the first but not the last time Poppy encountered someone whose life had not turned out the way he had wanted it to, whose disillusionment rivaled his accomplishment. Soon she would learn to diagnose the symptoms: a wandering eye, an aching heart. Where in other girls their fear would have run untrammelled confronted with the dissolution of adulthood, Poppy found herself harboring, floating, rocking her vessel in these waters of discomfort.

Poppy knew to factor 2-3 hours on top of when the Lindleys said they’d be home. It was dark when she left at night, and he walked Poppy to her car. Being that close to someone’s orbit feels like a whirlpool, you are sucked into the intergalactic matter of the stars. It blinks out of their eyes and as they move close, right there, star shine on the fringe of eyelashes and where you are going no longer makes sense because it is floating, it is outer spaces, it is travelling through dark matter. Certain people want to feel like they are whirlpools sucking people and objects in (destruction). What if a whirlpool fails to draw? When it needs to keep pulling in new objects to continue its forward motion? On these walks Poppy understood she was being sold something, though did not know what. (We must insert here that Poppy desired him because he was not silly. In fact, he was serious in his flirtations. She was tired of the silliness of her peers.)

When Poppy told Mr. Lindley she could not babysit because she had tickets to a new play, he replied, “Aren’t you a little young to be seeing that play?” Poppy believed Mr. Lindley’s riddles were a sign of adult conversational reciprocity. She sees them now for what they are: a set of keys jingled to occupy the fancy of a fitful child. Mollify her, marvel her with a sweet thing. Sara and Poppy used to talk in the girls’ restroom about Mr. Lindley,

giggle about how he was attractive. They made prank calls to the Lindleys' house, hanging up in urgent laughter.

“Watch out,” Mr. Lindley said, grasping her shoulder, “I don't want you to hurt yourself on any sharp edges,” he said and pushed Poppy aside to pull out the trash can. Her heightened sensitivity, like a barometer, turned her cheeks red.

A mental abnegation of desire does not impede the body's response.

The next time Poppy sat for the Lindleys she brought her analogue camera, with which Poppy took pictures (never of humans) but of the stark edges of other people's belongings. Exposing partial images. Only after developing a photo of the left side of her body did Poppy understand that she'd worn a too-low-cut shirt. Contrary to her belief that she'd been pelted with unwanted gazes, the developed image exposed her complicity. Poppy, devoutly Catholic, now felt two beliefs competing for total occupancy of her mind. One promised immediate salvation; she knew nothing of the gods he worshipped. She takes a picture of Mrs. Lindley's foot in an espadrille. Because the thought of crossing the edges of things flowered simultaneously in Mr. Lindley and Poppy's minds, clumsiness, missteps, and unfelt phrases clattered between them. These behaviors of guilt, as though they had transgressed, disappeared after they did.

Her hair had grown long since he'd last seen her. She'd been away for the summer working as a camp counselor. She did not want to touch him but only hold the image of his tie loosened in her mind, lift it off, and put it around her own neck. She did not want him to touch her, because to do so would break the glass of their desire, which was perfect: so clear,

consuming everything inside its transparent walls. Her yearning tastes like premature loss for what she has never had and, yet, somehow, she savors it fully.

The room was canopied; the ceiling, dug out; the nightstands his and hers. Mrs. Lindley had Vicks on hers, which she spread over her lips before bed. Mr. Lindley wanted Poppy's freedom, the ability to be a boy adventuring. Poppy would grow up, move away. She could move away. What would it mean for him to have had Poppy in his bedroom, with enormous floor-to-ceiling curtains looking out over a landscaped garden, infinity pool, and child's playhouse?

His shirt smelled like flour. When he unzipped the zipper of her uniform skirt, it pinched her skin: "Ouch," she said. "Did that hurt?" he responded. The presentiment of this exchange brought them pause. From the dip of pause, Poppy recognized this as her last opportunity for a full stop. If she had said yes and stopped that first night from happening, Poppy's soul would not be subject to eternal damnation, or so Poppy believed.

He shimmed his arm around her, swung her up. Her mind in tumult. She did not realize until afterward that she'd been trained by him, her answers to his questions swallowing his loaded litigation vocabulary. Poppy stuck her fingers in his tie. She pulled.

There is a moment walking in fall when the air is still and empty, when the temperature feels like nothing on skin. On her walk home, Poppy passed a series of ceramic cats before glass windows and Halloween decorations: ghosts, skeletons, candies. The pure fall of clean air, empty. She could hear the grass. The day crickets. Spanish moss hung heavy in trees, weighing a limb down like dove clusters, feathering it.

"I can't wait until you're old enough to share a glass of wine with," Mrs. Lindley told Poppy. Meanwhile Mr. Lindley read aloud to Poppy in bed from a book about ships: "Have

you ever heard anything so beautiful in your life?” he said. She rubbed the side of her face on the side of his face. “Why are you so sad?”

“I will preserve your childlike wonder,” he said, reading her books in bed. With Poppy he became like a boy again: over-eager and full of nerves and sheltered pride at his conquest. What Poppy didn’t know was that she reminded him (with her name, with her dancer’s carriage) of his wife when he’d first woken to love with her. While Poppy’s friends were discovering newness below bleachers, in dark movie theaters, beneath draped varsity jackets, Poppy lay beside a baby monitor with sounds of a child breathing coming from its plastic shell.

“This could ruin my life,” Mr. Lindley told her. He had more to lose, but he had more to gain, too. Poppy was already free. He wanted this freedom. It is true that humans can take freedom from someone else’s body. She’d succeeded at getting him to see her as a woman, but she could not have fully understood the implications of this—that with this new language came not just the respect but the responsibility and bearing of the shared burden of their sin.

There was still something gorgeous and boyish about him, but in the dark of night with his face in shadow he seemed older. His graying hair. Some people grow more beautiful with age, because when they are young they appear unattractively young. This was the case with Mr. Lindley, as Poppy knew from a silver wedding photo of Mr. and Mrs. Lindley set on the nightstand. Poppy wondered if Mr. Lindley would’ve noticed her when he was young. She realized there must have been others. Was she the first babysitter he’d taken to bed?

After the first night, Poppy sat in a too hot bathtub allowing numbing water to pour in her ears. Was she unable to sniff out danger or was she so accustomed to its presence in the room, engulfed by it, that she no longer detected its unique fragrance, which like the

synthetic odor of gasoline signaled, warned against the production of sparks, of flame, nearby?

There is fuel. This space will ignite.

She woke to the sun's bleeding juice, light dripping down her mango colored wall. Chrysanthemums of light, blossoms of death flowers, Mexican marigolds of mourning, limned her wall. School became boring by comparison, like an old film, washed of color, and Poppy was too young to appreciate its subtler value. She wanted life in technicolor. She was completely irrelevant to the world. Uprooted. Belonging nowhere, to no one. The train that went past her bedroom window at midnight screamed at her: POPPY GET THE FUCK OUT.

Poppy, who did not yet know the difference between lust and love, between hormones and the placid, touchless affection that constitutes true love, considered herself in love with Ainsley's father. Amidst the seasickness and confusion of her watery, drowning heart, Poppy rode the bus to the Lindleys' home and confessed everything to Ainsley's mother. In an unintentional obliteration of her leftover naiveté, Poppy confessed believing Mrs. Lindley would touch her hand, believing she would absolve her, believing she would look her in the eye.

The father was in the room, though he did not take his eyes off his book. The wife was nervous. She could not look Poppy in the eye. As soon as Poppy left, Ainsley's mother picked up the phone and dialed Poppy's father, recounting for him Poppy's absurd abortion story in its entirety except for the crucial detail of the reputed identity of the father of the aborted child. All the while Ainsley's father sat turning the pages of his book. When Mrs. Lindley hung up, Mr. Lindley closed the book and the matter was never discussed between them. That he did not wear a condom did not surprise Mrs. Lindley for this was how she had

become pregnant with their child. She shook her head in a way that under other circumstances would have appeared stylishly endearing. Having grown up with an alcoholic father, Mrs. Lindley was adept at drowning unwanted images from her mind. She felt betrayed by Poppy. Mrs. Lindley had seen a younger version of herself in her, but she knew now how she would proceed. She would leave Ainsley's father. She would reconnect with her old boyfriend, she would make images recede.

Poppy felt an affinity with her father like the left foot of a hawk feels with a tree branch, a landing, graceful ease. Poppy looked like her father while her sister took after their mother with her thumbprint dimples and sun-washed complexion. Poppy did not anticipate how her revelation would stun her father who still took her to buy new tennis shoes, pressing his thumb down over her foot: Is that your big toe? Poppy, who had never had to protect anyone in her life, could not understand what it meant to hold the puddle of a knowledge in her mind, constantly diverting a beloved not to stomp in it for fear there was nothing substantial beneath, only muddy water the traipser would fall into, irredeemably. How could she understand the impulse to protect, to not spoil what her mother had so carefully attempted to preserve by not disclosing? Who had she ever protected? What newborn secrecy had she held in her hand—soft, vulnerable, not wanting to be let go?

Her father looked at her the way a pedestrian looks at a driver who, pushing past the speed limit, nearly runs over the walking human in juvenile recklessness. A complete and final judgement on one's character resides in this look. Her mother sat sparking, sparking. A lighter who would not flame, but hot to the touch. "If she persists to aggrieve us with her futile rampages," Poppy's mother threatened from downstairs, leaving the threat off her scold

as she had done to Poppy and Athena as children. She said this indiscriminately to the dog, a Cavalier King Charles who though deaf nonetheless received regular verbal scoldings.

It was decided Poppy would be sent for an extended visit to her aunt's house in Mexico City to live without air conditioning and brush her teeth from a glass of purified water for her final two years of high school. In twice failing to protect what had been their responsibility to protect, what else could Poppy's parents do but reject the child they had repeatedly failed to save? Poppy packed carelessly, arriving with too many shorts and too little sense.

Before being shipped off, Poppy saw Mr. Lindley in the supermarket. Poppy fled. Mr. Lindley stood in her aisle buying tear-free shampoo for Ainsley. Poppy's heart leaps in fear, she sees him. Poppy sees blue eyes and her acne facewash hits the ground. Adults don't hit and run. They lie, withhold, conceal, break eye-contact. Everywhere cowed, uncertain. He had such beautiful blue eyes. Of one thing Poppy is certain: her dead baby had blue eyes. It is not uncommon for babies born into blue eyes to have those same eyes darken upon first viewing the world. Poppy's parents had never disowned her so much as feared going near her post abduction. What is love if not an agreement to never recoil in disgust at someone's humanity? And if she felt unreal in the supermarket in the flare of bright lights, did Mr. Lindley see her and wish her crushed?

2 *Mexico City*

The peacock spread its wings. A woman in jeans, red sweater, black boots with thick heels. A woman of forced gaiety, trying to have a good time, Poppy's aunt was aggressively jovial. This made Poppy's eyes un-focus like a camel's. This aunt was her father's sister, married to

the owner of every Coca-Cola bottling facility in Latin America. Glass jars filled with sweetness.

Las tres primas, Isa, Camilla, Luisa, with their dark hair and dark eyes, were all beloveds on the walls of the grandparents' home, which was the second of three floors in Mexico City. The bottom of the house opened to air. It breathed. The three beloveds lived 5 minutes away by car, 15 walking, 25 in traffic. They had the intimacy of family in framed photographs, except they were real children stepped out from the photograph and sat on laps. The youngest was the grandmother's favorite, leaving the two oldest vying and reconnoitering for the title of la consentida.

On visits when she was little, Poppy loved the three young cousins with their different smelling pillows. She was the cherished one who did not know how to eat their food, speak their language. She was shy and less affectionate. Now the cousins were three women. They were like magnets or some sticking organism whose energy emerges in bunches. Taken alone they were slippery, metallic and dull. Together they were loud, shiny as brass. Their personalities blended, their raucousness bounced off one another like the shiny pellets in pinball machines. Jewelry lacquered around them, dangled from ears. They walked around the house in underwear. Their voices were elaborate and beautiful contraptions, spinning like the ballerina at the center of a jewelry box. Who ruled? Not one of them. The sisters were loyal to each other.

Poppy's aunt was preparing (arranging the dishes set out by housekeepers) dinner, when Poppy walked in and offered to help, wanting to make a good impression. Poppy would find the thing she needed to win someone over and pull it out to win them over. She would've said thank you thank you, but she no longer felt capable of spurious gratitude. She

had not wanted to be dining here, looking at the strange glass-encased center of the house, a small plant-like garden, through which the sky sounds fell into the rest of the house. A sherbet-colored house.

“I’ve got it under control, gracias chiquita,” the aunt said, pivoting, calling to Isa: “Isa get in here. Ayúdame en la cocina.”

“Camilla, group text the Rodriguez family and see who’s going to their cena tomorrow so we can decide whether we want to go or not.”

“Wouldn’t that be a little awkward? Like ‘Oh, hey never mind we’re not going unless the right people are going?’” The cousins and aunt were always planning and lunching and dining. There is an unstated competition among the rich to see who can keep the busiest.

“Tienes razón flaca.”

“I just found Kim Kardashian’s vacation rental,” Isa called from the floor where she was on her back with her feet in the air searching for beach houses for the family to rent that summer in Puerto Escondido.

The arrival of a young man, a friend of the cousins, sharpened Poppy’s aunt and cousins into an aggressively flirtatious exchange.

The guy was selling the aunt insurance in the living room near a stone relic from Aztec times placed on a red cloth on a glass table. “Since what age have you been drinking?” he said.

“Can we tell him that you do cocaine, smoke mota, all that?” the aunt said. She wore her hair blown out and a pink sweater with a frill, umami, a human mushroom.

“You girls should pursue a relationship because that’s what you deserve. When my husband was kidnapped,” she began.

“That happened to my friend. She was at a party without protection. Why didn’t they just give out bodyguards to everyone?”

“Remember Monica? She married that sculptor? He had his vasectomy reversed for her, and then he left her because he panicked at the child. Now she’s happy, 31, young and free. Cliché, it’s true, but she is. She had an affair this past summer in the house with Felipe.”

“The painter? He’s trash.”

“He’s very important as an artist.”

“Yeah but he’s a loser as a man. He hands out fake names at restaurants. His body guard cases rooms before he goes inside. Please, les valen madres su pinche dinero.”

“It was like when my husband was kidnapped we had a house we were going to rent and the tenants called and asked for my husband. ‘He’s not here,’ I said. ‘Where is he?’ they asked. And I said, ‘The truth is that I don’t know where he is but if you find him do let me know.’”

“Or people called the house to say, ‘I need to discuss something of an intimate and greatly important nature with your father,’” Isa continued, picking up mother’s tale, “‘What is that?’ I’d ask, and they’d go: ‘It’s a private matter between the Señor of the house and me.’ If it’s so private why don’t you know that he was kidnapped five weeks ago pendejo?” They laughed.

“Que mala onda,” the man said.

Poppy’s uncle had escaped out the window after being kidnapped. He’d been held in captivity for nine months. He’d gone to the neighbors for respite, but they’d turned him away from their door for he looked like a crazed homeless person with his beard grown out and his body caved in from all the time spent indoors. He approached a taxi driver and beseeched

him to take him to a hospital, but the taxi driver refused. Poppy's uncle asked for them to pray together, and, believing that he must be an educated and worthwhile human, the taxi driver drove the uncle home where his wife (Poppy's aunt) and his three daughters were unloading from a van. The police arrived and asked the taxi driver to guide them back to the street where he'd picked up the wandering, disoriented, newly-freed uncle. Upon arriving at the location of his captivity, a colonial house with a blue door, the police searched the area, but the captors had fled.

The house was vacant, the blue door ajar.

It was like this: they take your clothes to disorient you. They beat you up a little, so you know what to expect. He woke with a sore on his mouth. They wrote to him: "What would you like to drink? We will give you anything."

"Whiskey, straight," he requested. They communicated solely via notes slid under the door so that her uncle could not hear and identify their voices. They played music day and night to disorient him—he did not know the time of day. He used the sixty-minute reel to track time (if the loop of music played twenty-four times, one day must've passed, he estimated). He heard a voice saying to him: don't drink the whiskey. "Why?" He responded to the voice. Because you have no power over your kidnapping, but you have power over whether or not you drink this whiskey. He went to the corner of his room where he could not be seen on camera by his captors, he feared another beating, and poured the whiskey down the commode.

It was at that moment that he felt liberated amidst his captivity.

I'm going to be here, he thought, and I'm going survive here. He would create his own liberty, even in captivity, this was his life-sustaining goal. He requested books and paper

to keep his mind busy. He did physical exercises and imagined he was training to run a marathon. He was taken by professionals; they would not have killed him after his wife paid the fee. Why the delay? His wife was bargaining. She wanted to save him and keep the family fortune intact.

Poppy's uncle would never forgive the aunt for failing to pay his ransom immediately. But she had been told by the police division specially designated by the government to deal with los secuestros to avoid paying the full asking price for the safe return of her husband's living body. The government had set up a special unit/police force with input from London to grapple with the rising number of kidnappings—this was the nineties, when the rich in Mexico said: either protect us and do something about the kidnappings or we'll leave the country with our money and leisure and casas and hijos. In response, the government consulted with international experts and established an elite squad to protect the rich who had hired a bevy of bodyguards—protection of another sort. They told Poppy's aunt to deliver the cash to Brazil, but how could she transport that sum of money on an airplane? She couldn't. It was highly suspicious; it would sound alarms. They sent her ransom notes and updates in cards tucked into bouquets of flowers delivered to the family home.

Poppy's aunt and her family had told the children that their father was away tending to a prolonged business venture. But when he returned he insisted that the girls sit before him on the leather sofa as he recounted for the family the story of his kidnapping, of all he had been through, what he had determined in order to survive, the story of his unlikely escape and his religious faith, which gave him hope in the chasm to persist throughout his adverse

ordeal. The kidnapping was a family mythology, like how Poppy's father had shot off his finger with a rifle.

Here was the difference: on Poppy's Mexican side of the family, they discussed the taboo. One could ask questions, they didn't veer away from true stories. Remember, her uncle had wanted the daughters present to hear the detailed horrors he'd lived through (nine months! how did he not go mad?). In contrast, Poppy's U.S. side of the family had buried her captivity. It was not discussed. The impenetrable silence occluded any understanding or witnessing to the defining event in her life. If she had fallen closer to the Mexico side of her family tree, perhaps she would've found the internal strength to escape mentally, held, as she had been, physically.

People throw Spanish words at Poppy: THINK FAST.

How do I greet people? Poppy keeps leaning in for a hug, then a cheek kiss, everything deteriorates. *What are you doing?* Collisions. Ant eggs or bone marrow? *Can I see the menu?* They're eating for three hours. Food rituals exist here in their own time. The time of being with people.

There was a strange shift in which Poppy would stake out a position and Camilla would follow suit. She depended on Poppy for her opinions and views. Poppy set them moving; Camilla boarded the Poppy train. "I could be depressed at Yale or I could go home and be depressed," Camilla shared, revealing the reason behind her return to CD.MX. She sought a pre-furnished flat to rent in Roma and room up with some other fresas newly returned to the city.

“I’ll get depressed if I live at home much longer,” Camilla said, grooming her thick, lush eyebrows at the breakfast table. “What’s the cool part of Roma? Roma Norte or Roma Sur?” she asked Isa, who was renowned for her savvy of secret social spaces. Isa rolled her eyes. Roma was no longer cool and if Camilla didn’t realize that then she was beyond her helping. Let Camilla live in a spot that was so two neighborhoods ago. Let Camilla fall into a tourist trap.

Poppy’s aunt scooped a mound of bovine colostrum from a gold bag stamped: FOR VETERINARY USE ONLY into her green tea. The front of the bag bore the image of a calf suckling a baby bottle. She ritually partook of alternative medication supplements.

They rode the Metrobús, which the cousins had never ridden, to the MUAC, where Poppy’s aunt raved about knowing the artist from a Buddhist retreat. One of the works on display involved the artist selling sex to an art collector, filming the sexual encounter, and looping the piece on a screen. Poppy took a photo of a painting titled “Untitled Fire Painting.”

Light limped up the side of the MUAC, luminous little vine. The aunt captured a photograph of the reflection of the primas’ feet in the glass building. Lizards scurried into the shade beneath the portico. Light landed on Poppy’s arms. She felt herself burning.

“Your shoes are too big.”

“I’m going out with un amigo but you’re más que invitada, querida,” Luisa said.

“Be nice to my friend the bartender,” the aunt said, meaning, flirt with him a little.

“I shall kiss him,” Poppy said, attempting to establish a bantering exchange with her aunt, who ignored Poppy and texted on her cellphone. Poppy was unsure how to charm her aunt, who was impossible to seduce as she sensed, correctly, that Poppy posed a threat. A

woman with a child heavily asleep passed before Poppy. Poppy stopped. She saw her. Poppy gifted a blue twenty pesos into the woman's childless hand. "Que Dios te bendiga," the woman said, careful not to disturb her slumbering bundle.

"If you don't orgasm, it's violence against women," Isa said, explaining what her boyfriend had told her. Isa felt pressure to orgasm each time they had sex, making it impossible for her to orgasm. She was twenty, sleeping with four different men, and in love with a woman of thirty-five who seldom answered her WhatsApp messages, and somewhat inappropriately still liked to sit on her father's lap. *So, this is my counterpart.*

"You deserve everything," Poppy's aunt told Poppy and her cousins, sliding her hand into the back pocket of Poppy's jeans and squeezing Poppy's ass. Poppy stiffened.

"Do you want a ride anywhere? Because if not I'll tell the chauffeur to go ahead and leave." The chauffeur stood beside the car, waiting. He churned over his own dreams of owning a store.

Poppy missed being able to control the climate of a room. She sat beside windows to escape into the clouds. She taught English after school to two wild-haired girls who threw sharpened pencils, pointed educational daggers, at her butt. On her own, Pao (the girls' mother) seemed plain, but beside her husband, a blonde from Barcelona, their physical differences created such a striking disparity, an alacrity and harsh music of the senses, like two opposite notes on the piano struck at once. With her husband Pao became pure jazz, while on her own she was plain as sheet music (pure potential). Her husband played her, played her, played her. This was true in more than one respect. Both spoke with an endearing accent. Her husband was tall, blonde. She was dark-haired, a social smoker. They'd married in a garden in Polanco,

where Pao originated.

Pao had only one hand. The absence defined her. It was the first thing she told people. She used it as a talking point whenever she needed to clarify or define something or establish her viewpoint on life. “I’ve lost my hand, you see.” She would tell about the difficulties of her absent hand. Poppy scratched her shin and looked at the floor when Pao began these discourses on the missing hand. On the arm with the missing hand, Pao wore bracelets kept in place by their tightness. It was this adornment of the wound, this marked indication of absence, which repulsed and fascinated Poppy.

Poppy would like to adorn her wounds in this way. How could this woman expose herself, be so forthcoming and upfront about her absence? Poppy imagined wearing a sign around her neck that read: I WAS ABDUCTED. But this did not define Poppy. In fact, she did not relate to the biography of a person who had survived this. She felt distinct, unrelated to the person who had witnessed this event, and instead felt herself to be another more beautiful, sheltered creature like a pearl shucked from an oyster after spending her years delicately nestled inside the moonlike tender pink cave of an oyster shell.

Certain missteps, however, had caused a not-too-pretty adjustment in Poppy’s character. She’d grown cagey, judgmental, resistant to rules put in place to protect life.

“He’s an electronic musician,” Pao responded.

“By musician you mean you push a lot of buttons on stage?” Poppy said. Her words, a mistake, a severe lapse in girlish judgement: she was not their equal. Poppy felt her words trundle into internal laughter, like a belly laugh that pulls a self apart. A deep body laughter she’s shared only with her sister Athena. Or was it only at her sister Athena?

“What’re you doing here in Mexico?” Pao said.

“I had an abortion. My family kind of made fun of me. My family was like: you are so smart why would you do that? I thought you were so smart.” *I don't need to be justifying myself to these people.*

“I love your earrings,” Poppy said.

“She debated over whether or not to where those tonight,” David said, not knowing he had shown Pao’s feminine foibles, revealed her to Poppy in ways Pao would never have ceded.

Stealing from drugstores in Mexico was no fun. Poppy needed new dopamine hits. She found them unexpectedly inside her cousins’ home. This new thrill came to her in the middle of the night. Poppy never tries adjusting to Mexico. She would no longer adjust herself like a radio dial. She would hit scan and let herself roam the airwaves freely. The climate was gorgeous, like living inside an atrium set to the ideal temperature for flowers. Athena started her first year as a music major at a rowdy state school. Poppy followed her Snapchat stories of tailgates. They left one another daily voice diaries, virtual recaps of their lives, talking into an electronic device. Athena’s voice capsules delivered electronic volts to Poppy’s heart. Athena ends hers with *Ciao Sugar* or *Be good Poptart* or *Don't forget to say your prayers* or *XXX dog kisses from Rose*.

Poppy respected Athena’s sternnesses. Athena’s particular-ness meant she took care of things. She would be responsible. She had walls up, but they were the walls of someone who understood the importance of boundaries. Athena felt entitled to the world. Meanwhile, Poppy felt shame for taking up space in a room. At nineteen she was the kind of girl who was anorexic because she wanted to disappear from the world. Unseen. Athena saw Poppy, who

changed her clothes as many as five times in one day, as someone lost who was not wanting to be lost.

Luisa, Camilla, and Isa's ubiquitous prancing around the house in thongs and unintelligible scrambled nonsense conversation was beautiful. Nothing pious or sacred, it was animal, straight A's Luis-A, Camill-A, Is-A.

The death of Poppy's uncle the following year amounted to the burial of Poppy's secret as the person she would've liked to effect by revealing the secret was dead. She'd been sleeping with her uncle, her uncle by marriage, her last two years of high school. Poppy had walked into his office to snap photographs, flipped the switch. What she saw: bouquet patterns on the wall.

She'd felt the sensation of kissing someone you're physically not attracted to, a mild revulsion. Her uncle was neurotic, reptilian, possibly on pain medications. Still, she'd wanted to hold the heart of him in her hand. She was nervous.

He'd said to her, "It's okay, go ahead." Just that. And Poppy did.

"I understand." He'd turned off the lights. Computer glow blued his face.

Everything he said and did was a calculation. *You are too old to be this naïve.* But one thing that gave Poppy hope were his spontaneous reactions to her. You cannot calculate spontaneous reactions. "You scare me," he said as she touched his arm. There was a gentleness, a patience with which all was said in his bedroom. She felt electrified. She was in a room with a person on the same level of subterranean nefariousness, who was attuned to the baleful and curious in social situations. In her bathroom the ends of Poppy's hair dip into bath water, her wet hair leaving rivulets of soapy water streaming down her chest. She rose

dripping and red from the tub. *You are here, trapped, forsaken, seen.* Loud, she could be loud in bed. Like some wound.

Her uncle liked to hold forth at dinner. He spoke to his guests about restaurants, movies, fad diets, money doctrines. He thought he could dilute the power of Poppy's shame by placing it next to another object: telling Poppy about his business. He had tried to erect impenetrable walls outside of the bedroom, but, ultimately, she saw that in his responses to her, which were intense and exuberant, he had become invested in or intrigued by their sexual entanglement. She felt disgusted by how clearly sexually motivated the questions he put to her at dinner were.

"I'm more and more suspicious of people as being full of shit," Poppy told Luisa. Poppy laughed at an inappropriate time, her uncle complaining about his day and Luisa eyed her warily.

Behold the bravely unspoken.

Luisa had a religious sensibility without being formally religious, which translated to solemnity. Her aunt who lived in the city was trying to recruit her to the Opus Dei. Luisa felt tempted. There was something beautiful about their sayings: "Look at the sky and know your mother, your true mother is always with you," she would say to Luisa on a bad day.

Poppy stabbed her palm trying to remove the pit from an avocado. Bleeding, she left manchas on her white shirt, white lacey tablecloth, toalla blanca with the wound on her hand. Luisa arrived home at seven in the morning after spending all night dancing at reventóns, bar hopping, and listening to her friend's trio of flamenco guitarists. She was rich but muy coda. Her social calendar was so booked she left one comida that started at 3:00 by 4:00 to catch the tail end of another comida. She accomplished this by hailing frequent Uber rides as,

carless, she chose to navigate the city like a loose-leaf sheet of paper, blowing in the wind, flying about las colonias. She was a frequenter of lessons: voice lessons, flamenco lessons, horseback riding lessons, watercolor lessons. She was, in many ways, living the life Poppy wanted to live—free and mobile and unclogged by enclosures of the past. She took Poppy to jazz clubs in Coyoacán.

“My life’s pretty tight, isn’t it?” She left behind a coat in an Uber that cost one month’s Poppy’s rent and when her phone rang it chirped like a thousand birds. It was her love calling.

“Todos mis novios ya me están hablando.” She said. Poppy’s real self was peeking through. She wants to topple over all the carts. She walks faster, almost trips. People ask after her. They are loving. *You are a human. If you fall down, we will not leave you there linda.* But she wants to be left there, bleeding on the ground. At night she cannot sleep from her burning knees. She goes to reventóns. She goes out and pesos fall from her pockets, colored butterflies. She has last night’s eyeliner like someone’s punched her eye. Not to worry (the scent of her own perfume nauseates her) she doesn’t throw up until she gets home.

Poppy’s uncle was performative and liked to listen to himself speak like a lawn mower set to high. You should be deeply impressed = his general cadence. But none of his lines were throwaway. He reeled out wrote phrases when he felt threatened, expecting cliché lines to act as tonics for the frangled nerves of a room. But he frangled folks’ nerves with his holding forth. He cherished the crispness of his own language, took solace in his ability to articulate his own mind clearly. Poppy was expressive but in a different way, her heart rose toward the newborn fragilities he strangled under an unremitting will to domineer. *This ship will survive calamities. Endure,* leaving behind that relationship with her departure from

Mexico, she felt herself stretched. When people looked at her they must see the perturbing truth: she had been seeking out inappropriate affairs for far too long.

The cousins' father died Poppy's first year in college from a hereditary form of mad cow disease, leaving behind an international bottling co. to which Poppy's aunt now stood at the helm. She ran the company with more panache and natural business acumen than Poppy's uncle and took to her new role with a stern finesse and the same staunchness and sureness of decision which had allowed her to bargain for a good deal on her husband's life years earlier.

While Poppy was in Mexico her father wrote to her in an email forgiving her: *I have loved you since the day you were born and will love you until I die.*

Poppy's cousins splashed about in the money as in a fountain. After the uncle's death, the aunt lost even the semblance of control over the daughters.

Grace resided in her resignation to the daughters' rule.

Let it not be said that the aunt was not beneficent. Indeed (we say later not to trust someone who uses indeed where a simple yes would suffice but we need it here for rhythmic variety), the housekeeper occupied the most prestigious wing of the house, and the aunt supported a wayward nephew from her deceased husband's side and other stray folks in need of a hand. The world had called for her to be brusque, on the qui vive, and she had responded to its call. Cautious in forming new connections though not unable, social grace bloomed, falsely, perhaps, but she knew how to disarm and maintained a retinue of much loved and lenient friends.

On the precipice of change, Poppy saw once again her room as she had first loved it on her arrival to Mexico, strange and unfamiliar with knee-level scars (interrogations) cut into the walls and a blue butterfly figurine tacked to the stucco wall in mock flight. And she saw

that no matter where she went she would take the image of these notches embedded within her as a child carries the alphabet within them once it's learned. One spends one's life repeating it internally.

3 *New York City*

It was four years of crap-shooting and cramming in college before Poppy saw her core cousins again when they gathered for Isa's wedding in NYC. They reunited with Athena and her fiancée, Leander. (We must pause here briefly to see Leander: he wore thin ties and was, capriciously, an artist who would have done better in finance or litigation. His work was garnering acclaim.) Leander broke Athena's gift: a pair of glass Tiffany candlesticks in a blue box. Dropping them on the stairwell as he bounded up the stairs to incorporate cardio into his day, he heard the tinkling of glass (he knew glass intimately, this was his medium, he made sculptures in glass). He chose not to tell Athena. She would not have given the candlesticks to the bride and groom in their state. She would have insisted they return to the store and purchase whole candlesticks, but, frankly, Leander didn't care for Athena's Mexican side of the family. He found them unsavory.

The cousins returned to one another with a familiarity that allowed them to talk freely and grasp one another's elbows in exasperation and clickiness. They took up that strange cousin closeness that comes from years of knowing someone peripherally, like a storefront passed habitually on one's commute home without ever being entered into. After their father was kidnapped, Isa, Luisa, and Camilla summered in LA where they spoke fluent English and engaged in whatever behavior they chose. They joined sororities. They grew up and did

nothing in particular or everything in particular, both, or they returned to Mexico and took on older lovers under the ruse of studying art. When the primas spoke it was with the same great big beautiful irreverence as before. Viva.

In a family of immigrants this is how it would be: flocks migrating back looking for warmer climates. Movements compounded by time; origins muddled and the culture of one family fanning into the culture of the next. The most recent returnee, Camilla, vowed: “I will die in la Ciudad de México.” Where did she end on the map, where did she begin? When Poppy leaves CD.MX the place she is homesick for thereafter is Mexico not Santa Monica. She must leave to know this longing. What about the immense, immeasurable sadness of Poppy’s father never wanting to go back because Mexico is dirty and the daughter thinking *yes but it’s beautiful, yes but it’s loving?*

The cousins changed in front of one another at the hotel and it smelled musky like women and they walked about in thongs and removed and replaced bras. Breasts and thighs and weight. The clear marks of weight fluctuation of ups and downs made Poppy remember the middle one starving herself. Thinness. “I realized I was no longer in love the day before I left,” Luisa said. What did Luisa know about love? She had not read books and acted like reading was like smoking—something one picked up, like not shaving her underarms or legs.

After downing mini-bottles in her hotel room Poppy was free. Camilla had stayed out until seven am dancing. She knocked off two hours of catch-up sleep and was verbally and inchoate. They took an Uber to Isa’s wedding, all four of them crammed in the backseat.

“I’m horny and need to get laid,” Camilla said. Camilla was too smart and too rich and too free to be contained by any righteous American social mores. If she had been born into a U.S. family, she would’ve worked to establish the guise that her privilege had been

earned not inherited, but she bore no crushing legacy of the Protestant work ethic and Jesus she enjoyed sunbathing, traveling, and wearing headscarves like pinions.

Poppy missed this lively and playful intimacy. The oldest cousin, Camilla, schmoozed the Uber driver to earn a favorable rating. Her questions carried the veneer of caring. Uber drivers rated them 5-stars and permitted them to sit in the front seat where they hooked aux cables up to iPhones and streamed music through lowered down windows. They were used to having a chauffeur in Mexico so Uber was an extension of their original ecosystem. Poppy would never have taken an Uber if she wasn't with her cousins; she would've ridden the subway. The sisters needlessly compared their Uber ratings as they were given stars based on their level of hotness not on their comportment during Uber rides.

Poppy sat on the floor between her two cousins who were wearing black converse beneath black ball gowns. Oh, the lace frill of roses on Camilla's dress! Poppy had a boyfriend who wrote sad little poems about rubbing the leg of his pants or the smell of his hand after touching her pants—she could never remember whose pants and what smell, baffled by his syntax. There she was dating someone who did not hurt. Bored. Not pulled in. She could only be pulled in when it was fucked up. Have you ever noticed how we love people more when they don't have time for us? The people around us ready and willing to provide love we so easily shirk. Their affection comes too readily.

The youngest cousin, Isa, was marrying her best friend Gracie. It was not clear to Poppy whether or not Isa and Gracie were sexually involved. It was known that Isa kept a boyfriend in Oaxaca who attended the wedding. Isa raised her arms, she chose not to wear deodorant, and the beautiful way her unibrow bowed made her appear severe, stern.

“My dearest friend came to visit me and she slept with one of the men I’m sleeping with and now I feel so connected to her, like we’ve been with one another. It’s beautiful,” Luisa said. They kept going into Spanish, and Poppy kept hauling them back into English. Luisa was celebrating a breakup by going on Tinder. “I’m just going to bang as many guys as I can. Honestly right now I’m sleeping with like six dudes.” Her eye contact was infectious.

“Do you think there’s sexual desire between them?” Poppy asked Luisa of Isa and Gracie. Luisa glowed with feminist outrage: “Of course there’s sexual desire between them. No one’s making them get married. That’s offensive as fuck.”

Luisa currently lived in a groovy flat in Condesa overlooking Parque Mexico. The flat was paid for by their mother for a reputed \$20,000 US dollars per month. Isa was “working” at her father’s company, which, since his death she was technically co-owner and future inheritor of said business. Her job entailed keeping herself busy under the guise of shadowing various senior level employees. Her mother (Poppy’s aunt) had recently hired a personal assistant, a woman named Ellen Maladrian who followed Poppy’s aunt around town and undertook domestic duties freeing the aunt up to her motley retreats, vacations, meditations, and social meals.

Luisa’s unofficial project had been dating a chef eighteen years her senior who she served as unofficial angel, or investor, for in his farm-to-table restaurant venture in LA. She filled her Instagram with colorful pictures of vegetables. Luisa was the type for whom the world ceased to exist the moment she found a boyfriend. In her cabinet, she kept a stockpile of anti-aging creams and vials and doodads and serums and things. She had recently purchased a white Mercedes Benz with a pink license plate parked outside The Bungalow Santa Monica. Piña Calmada she touted in social media posts to which people responded:

The length of your legs is inhuman >> Everyone has a betchy side >> Hair on fleek >> Skinny goals >> OMG stop you're hot af >> Great IG >> I'm so happy you found someone to take photoshits of you. Shits not shoots. Clever.

Intentional.

The dream of Instagram was the creation of a life where suffering did not exist. No one posted photographs of their parents' dying in a hospital or their face swollen and crimped from sleep.

There were three blonde boys throwing glass into the fountain. There was Poppy stubborn in her English, stoppered up like a bottle of jasmine fragrance.

In a series of pictures from after the wedding, Isa has pulled away from dancing. Hand raised to her face, she is embarrassed.

Isa's sister, Camilla, worked at Snapchat. She cannot explain what she does very well. It is not certain she knows what she does.

"I am qualified for my job," she said, by which she means she has big boobs.

"She's not qualified," Luisa said, "It is better to be honest about these things, that's something I read recently," she added.

"I worked hard," Camilla said. Camilla was hardworking and had legitimately earned her job but could not escape judgments that she had gained advantages based on looks not abilities.

"That's right you earned it," Poppy said.

"I've always been an enormous fan of Poppy. Haven't I always said that?" Camilla said.

"Salud, Poppy," Luisa said, "I'm leaving my boyfriend to get an MBA," she added.

“¿Cuándo hangouteamos?” Camilla asked.

To look at the hundreds of photos taken by the unsanctioned photographers (those owners of camera phones) is to catch the bride sneezing or the other bride looking to the side.

Weddings are like children’s birthdays: an excuse for the celebrated to act like monsters without fear of judgment. Isa, drunk, looked for an excuse to make a scene. The oldest cousin, Luisa, whipped out her phone,

“You should make out with my friend tonight,” she flipped through photos of a fratty looking guy, clean cut, square jaw.

“He’s not my type,” Poppy said.

“Do you like black guys?” Luisa asked Poppy. This friend was undeniably cuter, and Poppy told her so, which prompted the cousins to launch into a discussion of dating black men.

Poppy spotted Pao and her husband David. She didn’t crack any eggs into the pot of a plan, but she drank wine and knew it would facilitate action shortly. Her cheeks turned a lovely red.

“Life is unfair, so being unfair is fair,” Poppy tried out.

“There is good in people,” Luisa said. As often happens in seas of people, smaller pools form. It seemed that in groups people were always cross talking or splitting into two’s. Poppy and a blonde from Barcelona formed a two. Poppy was twenty-two now. One moment he wasn’t listening, the next he was there. Poppy had relaxed. She wasn’t trying to leave a tattoo on the conversation. She understood loudness less and less.

Pao and her husband were opposites: blonde, brunette; tall, short; but both mean in the same shy, jocular way. Both prized their little meannesses as the mark of a true

personality. Pao was nearing forty but dressed like a child, constantly in jumpers and pinafores, schoolgirl clothes. Pao is guarded but mistakenly so for she has nothing of value to protect, Poppy thinks, but how she is wrong, for Pao had the most valuable of all things to protect: a family. She will never manifest the angelic quality of grace. If she cries, her tears will not be salty like the ocean or mournful like the wind that lives in trees but sweet, falling from she who has never dived on the floor clutching a pillow to her chest. *She must produce tears of nectar.*

Poppy drew near Pao's husband with his blonde hair, blue eyes. They'd been living in San Francisco, right up the coast from Poppy, for a year now.

"We bring the girls to the topless beaches when we visit Barcelona," Pao said.

"What do you do these days Poppy?" Pao's husband asked.

"I work in PR."

"Did you keep your Spanish?" Pao asked. She had cut bangs, which heightened her childish appeal, since Poppy had last seen her.

"Sure," Poppy said, "but my cousins speak English better than I speak Spanish."

"I did PR for the Mayor in Mexico. He was my father's friend," Pao said.

Poppy wanted to cut off Pao's hair, hurt her without her feeling a thing. She responded to Pao's small nips tenderly, with love. Because she wanted to be taken for one of them: la verdadera Mexicanas.

"With Monica's club volleyball tournaments and volunteering, I'm too giving."

"Self-care." Poppy said. She was done: she'd used up her listening. There was an attempt at bonding over a shared enjoyment of online stalking.

"Indeed," Pao replied.

Never trust a person who uses indeed where a simple yes would suffice.

Pao has her hand full carrying two plates. She asks Poppy to pick her phone up off her plate and place it in her bag. There it is: the urge to steal something. *You are transparent*, reaching her hand deep into the dark territory of Pao's purse, her hand grazing Pao's breast on its way out. Talking to Pao is like throwing darts at no fixed or memorable point. Pao is every slice of bread.

Poppy will tear her up and feed her to the ducks.

David punished Poppy for scowling at Pao by holding Luisa's eye, like a seatbelt securely fastened. He refused to look at Poppy no matter how she tried to steal his eye. Poppy understood his message: *You have not earned the foot space to stand here little girl.* Poppy refused to move. It was punishment to withhold his eyes for he had beautiful nightbowl blue eyes. Athena placed the Tiffany box on the gift table without knowing its contents are shattered.

Poppy drank. She became the ocean and the rocking was the ocean the glass of wine the ocean *your hair in my hand the ocean my head the intact morning the ocean the starlight the ocean.* The ocean washed over her eyes and she looked at things to pick up and pick at: she could not concentrate, the cracked wine glass. "Teach me about wine," Poppy had said to her father before being sent away. He began with the origin of wine and got up to barrels but never taught her anything about drinking.

A child passed and Pao said, "How cute," in the distracted way of adults with no sense of children as humans but as accessories. Poppy puts her face in a drawer, erupts into laughter, takes her face back out. If since her affair with her uncle Poppy had spent her life safely gliding in a canoe, this night she topples it over and feels the slime of lake ground.

The water is colder than she remembers.

Still, David will not look at Poppy. He is bravely acting out. To act out is always brave. "I'm going to get you a glass of wine, David," Poppy announced.

"That'll be good for you," David said medicinally. She knew that by flattering his intelligence she could win him over. She called him Day-vid.

"It's Dah-VEED," he said. *Accents.*

"Do you have fond memories of anything?" Poppy said.

"I have no memories."

"No memories of anything?"

"TV is dead. Media and advertising are merging. I believe in genetic engineering, in making human memory more meaningful through genomics."

It was this comment which made Poppy feel repulsively attracted to him. There was a language barrier she could never breach separating them, preventing them from being understood to one another. It had nothing to do with Spanish and English.

"This wedding is ridiculous," Poppy trashed. It wasn't that she was two-faced. It was that she was many-faced, could grow new faces as needed. It didn't matter that Pao was more gorgeous than Poppy. Attraction has little to do with physical beauty. David kept commenting on their conversation as it was occurring: "This is a great conversation," he said. *Doubtful.* He left the room to smoke. No. *Otra vez.* He left the room to open up a space for Poppy to discuss him in his absence. And talk about him she did. She sent Athena an iMessage that read: *Is it bad to hook up with someone at a wedding?* She did not mention that David was married but still Athena chirped: *Boo Poptart. Don't do it! It's for sleaze balls.*

“Look I love my wife, but it would be great to prove I’m attractive to someone else,” David said when he returned sliding his lighter to Poppy, sensing her need to dally. She reached for it and clicked. Pao had gone to bed. From across the room Pao had recognized the intense way David looked at Poppy as she spoke. Pao recognized her duty to intervene, to light her own cigarette and blow smoke in Poppy’s face. But she felt too fragile, too openly violated to defend her marriage. Poppy had watched as Pao and David kissed as they must have kissed 3362 times goodnights before. She felt wrenched by this lackluster kiss. It bespoke of routine, comfort. There were silver bowls of avocado halves and a female bartender in a faux-tuxedo shirt and black bowtie who resisted Poppy’s overtures of camaraderie. Poppy had worked as a bartender in college where she managed to pull in exorbitant tips by flirting with grandfatherly men. Poppy, unable to look at David, smeared lipstick across the sleeve of her silk dress.

On this ledge of knife, Poppy left David for now but was aware, always, of him in the room, aware of who he was talking to, his drink changing hands. He didn’t drink alcohol and this detail uncovered, like a peeled bandage, some great wound in need of protecting.

They caught one another glancing at each other across the room. It wasn’t that Poppy was avoiding him. It was that she was avoiding herself by staying away from him.

Recognition. She felt immediately attracted to him in the way one is attracted to people they’ve known once before. The familiarity is the allure. She was sure he recognized her but not sure he knew how to place her face. She felt seen by him in a way he had not seen her before.

If you are prone to certain mistakes opportunities to recreate these errors seek you out. David was looking for someone to ruin his life with, and she was the one. Yes, he had

been actively looking. His ambitions as an electronic artist having been thwarted, he needed an outlet for his creative energies, presided over by a skull (Alas, poor Yorick!) that sat atop his desk.

There making a stack out of the plates was Athena with a dripping beaded bag attached to her wrist, vaguely aware of her fiancée, Leander, debating opera beside a trophy display case.

“Could I borrow Poppy for a moment? Could use a hand in the restroom.”

“Be my guest,” David replied. Poppy followed Athena to the restroom like a child shuttled reluctantly between divorced parents from the fun parent to the enforcer of rules.

Athena opened her beaded bag and took out a plum colored lipstick. She said nothing but made eye contact with Poppy in the mirror. Wanting to avoid their own reflections, they looked at each other. It was only in contrast to Athena, whose dress remained crisp, her lipstick freshly applied, and her hair somehow miraculously still unfripped in her updo, that Poppy realized she looked a mess. She had drunk girl eyes beneath her eyeliner, which had smeared unattractively in crescent moons and champagne blotches along her nude silk dress.

Athena ran her tongue along her front teeth to wipe lipstick away. Wetting a sheet of paper towel, she dabbed at the blotches along Poppy’s silk dress.

“You can get it out with some baking soda. If you want I can take it to the hotel with me and make sure it doesn’t set. We’ll give you a ride to your hotel. I’ll drop in while you change?”

“I’m going to stay out a little later. The dress is ruined.”

“It’s not ruined. It just needs some care.”

“Fuck. Stop trying to save everything.”

Athena snapped her clutch closed.

“I need to get back to the hotel to check in with the dog sitter. It was great to see you. Stay safe.” Athena kissed Poppy’s cheek, reached one hand to smooth her updo and left the bathroom using her crumpled paper towel to avoid contaminating herself with the door handle.

Poppy grabbed the door handle and made her way out. (Barring this moment, the following scene might not have seemed so intentional. So much more of a pursuing rather than a falling. An out of controlness whose depth matched the perfection of Athena’s neatness and poise). Poppy’s hair which had been straightened now curled from the humidity and sweat.

Poppy tried to walk out before David. If they walked out together, it would presuppose them going back to her hotel together. She lagged. He lagged. Power is the ability to walk away from someone. She was always falling backward. Up the stairs of the subway. They took the subway. The subway looks like an underground rocket ship from the sixties. *This feels like the future.* The future looks like the 1960's. A great, whooshing thing—this underground ocean with bright electric eels carrying a belly full of humans. People trickle down the tunnel into the ocean.

David sees her in the reflective subway car window. There is no air for talking underwater. When you’re a child you worry over trying not to stick wet or metallic things in outlets to avoid a spark. But when you grow, you spend all your days trying to figure out how you produced that electricity as a child, recreating that danger, reaching for the plug: the

shock and volt of an electric thing. When she steps off, Poppy hears the ocean swim out from concrete.

Poppy remembers the blue eyes of the man who kidnapped her, the house, the man reaching his hand, it was dark, and stealing Poppy. The blue door. Poppy will steal something after all. Poppy prays: throws silent, sacred words into the sky: Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

“JESUS,” she wakes up in an unfamiliar hotel room, the AC blowing and no indication of time. A glass of water has been knocked down on the bedside table. Some mornings she wakes up and misses all the places she has ever been like someone is tugging at her feet. The look of sheets near a hot skinned body the sound of a bird that comes in like light before it is morning the quiet of nobody up and being the first up oh it is or oh it is not morning she is pulled to all the places she’s ever been. She woke with wine absorbed in her blood. She puts on her shoes. Pretends not to see. She wants to leave so he doesn’t know she wants him there and she wants him to wake and tell her to stay. She leaves a note for David with her number and kisses.

It was then Poppy learned the impressive capacity of the mind quarts full to make a problem no longer exist. She had a flight in two hours and shared a cab with a woman she offers gum, then ignored as the woman talks with increasing vivacity about her favorite son, whose concert she’d flown in to attend.

On the airplane, Poppy notices her bracelet, her favorite enclosure with the gold flower, missing, ripped off. Isn’t it nice to be held about the wrist?

Poppy and David meet a week at a time each month for six months, then a year. Poppy feels more firmly embedded, like a rock beneath thick layers of concrete, in this deeply secret layer of her life. She smells the black roads of California glowing, melting as she drives from LA to SF, crushing Tic-tacs, letting scan speed date the radio. She sets her car to automatic cruise control and folds her legs up crisscross, watching the sky change and allowing her arms to hang. She loves David because he pushes her around in bed. She is always wanting to be in touch with him from LA, though she has nothing particular to say. She spends money lavishly. She calls Athena.

“Are you needing money, Poppy?”

“No, all good,” Poppy lied. She didn’t want to need saving. She lowers her forehead to her knees. “Love you, bye.” She brings her soul to the used bookstore. They offer her eighteen bucks. She knows her soul is worth more. Still, she takes the money. (*I don’t ask you to abstain, she could hear her moral conscience saying, except you must pay the dues of your untamed sin.*)

She eyes David with the untamed ferocity of someone who admires and protects, both. She opens her car door; he drops in, kisses her shoulder. He’s rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. A knee-jerk reaction, she dips her shoulder away. David starts joking to distance Poppy. She’d forgotten to use compassion. She’d forgotten to ask that most important of all questions: why was he acting tender like this? Were the jokes related to work problems? His disciples likewise made jokes and deflected, to keep things from becoming too hot too fast. *You are afraid of me. You are keeping the self at a distance.* Poppy complains to David about how her boss spoke to her and David says: “Watch your thinking. There are more ways to do

things than you imagine.” When she tells him how she feels about the acquisition of an immoral, lucrative client at work he says to her: “Does anyone else see it like that?”

She begins to doubt her own perceptions.

Poppy sees David once out of context, i.e. not in bed, behaving deferentially toward his boss. David, suited, adopts a softer tone toward his boss than he does with Poppy in their exchanges as though his boss, not Poppy, were his lover. *When I look at your face lately I do not recognize you: your face in your hands. Always in your hands. You asked me if I was really crying, and I blot mascara into your shirt. I have never felt more attracted to you than when you reject me.*

That was a public moment at a public event. Poppy and David exchanged a look with too much knowing and David turned to his coworker and asked him a trivia question. Poppy was a private moment, a private event. She singled people out. *Aren't we always singling people out?* That was how to make someone feel special. Somehow, she's backed into a corner, literally. A circle of people surrounded her, her back against the blue wall. Poppy pulled David from the room. She was surprised he responded to her pull. Though she held on tightly, she felt her glass slipping. “Let's not do this in public,” David said trying to lead her away.

“It doesn't matter where we do it,” Poppy pulled back. Her phone chirped with an iMessage from Athena, a photograph of her dog Rose in a sun hat: *You're Pawesome.*

“I feel no sense of ownership over you,” David told her.

“You're pawesome,” Poppy said. She laughed with slight hysteria. It's terrible to be obsessive in love, which is always a thing made of glass. Slippery, it falls out of Poppy's grasp.

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The last night, like a full moon's appearance, always stands out from the nightlight of slender quotidian moons with its broad face and intense afterglow. Poppy lay on her back.

Tears pooled like warm milk in her ear canals.

David kissed her collarbones.

"Baby," he called to her.

He laid his head on her breast.

Though she was not a mother, she was mothering him. Fingers comfortingly in his hair. She listened to the light shining from the light fixtures. Its radiant sorrow.

The disquiet of David's guilty mind made Poppy quiet her own. "Quit feeling sorry for yourself," she wanted to say. But it wasn't that he felt sorry for himself. It was that he was deeply dissatisfied with the primary elements of his life: his wife, two children. Their Legos. There is some sticky quality one accrues when they've experienced extreme pain. People approach with their suffering on silver platters knowing you will never react with distaste, but you're unable to save them, *partake of it they offer it to me*.

"I don't believe in God. I've gotten myself to where I am in life." David said.

"What about salvation?"

"I've been in jail three times." David said.

"What for?"

"Does it matter?" He had named his car Norma, he loved her (the car). He believed sex without emotional connection was a waste of an extramarital affair. He liked to be in control.

"Weren't you afraid?" Poppy said, "That must have been terrifying."

“No,” he said, “I survived by joining the Aryan brotherhood for a few weeks.”

(Poppy are you frightened?)

“Come again?” Poppy said.

“What? You think the Mexican gang would’ve protected me?” Poppy got out of bed and pulled on her shoes, not bothering with socks. “It’s all gone. There is no record,” he said.

Deterioration occurs where there are no boundaries. Poppy is let go from her job as a photographer for an online lifestyle magazine geared toward millennials for missing too many photoshoots. She didn’t care for her job, because she loathed photographing swanky interiors and embroidered slippers. She sends photos of the edges of her and David to Pao, everything via email. Incontrovertible photos. Confessors never truly seek absolution for their sins but a salve for the semantic burden of unutterable desires. A bird came to the window and sang to Poppy, her neck feathers vibrating, then off to the left she flew, all her feathers vibrating. Freed from her long-distance love affair, her job, Poppy feels newly born past and present in the same space.

She’d been entirely wrong about how David felt toward her. He saw her as fun but also raw, vulnerable. Easy prey. Her heart swallowed in an effort to force the feeling down. She tried to regain footing in the situation by imagining the most pathetic things about David: his wife had more money than he did, he was neurotic about putting away his sunglasses, facetious in fear, strategic in social situations. He prohibited eating in his car out of a distaste for crumbs and insisted on backing into parking spaces. He worshipped at the altar of false gods. She could see through him, him and his false gods. Like an awful child Poppy picks and picks at the scab.

The wound never heals.

4 *Barcelona*

It is 2:30AM and David is up. Shuttled between Spain and New York, he's freshly arrived in New York from Spain where he's spent the summer with his mother, a failed artist and translator of art books from English into Spanish. David is seven. In her kitchen, David's mother makes David fish or leaves bread, serrano ham, bananas on the counter for him to feed himself. Sometimes she scrambles two eggs and leaves them in the pan. Though not at home that summer, David's mother allows him to play on the large patio of her fourth-floor walkup on red terracotta tiles overlooking street, tile roofs, tile skies. Not particularly at ease in his mother's apartment home, with its quirky selection of knickknacks, artworks, and questionably untouchable antique objects, David leaves during the day, taking his bike to the beach where he chews his fingernails and collects sea pebbles. He would've preferred seashells, but a lack of shells around him forces him to set his eye on collecting sea stones.

The thing David likes best about visits to his mother's in Barce are her friends who josh him, one pushing David too far, causing him to run to the bathroom to avoid public tears. David relishes their vulgar language, smoldering like their cigarettes, for which there is no apology, only encouragement from his mother. At the end of July, David arrives in New York a month earlier than expected, because his mother is leaving for Ibiza with a new lover. David is sent to his father's where he lives in NYC with Wife Three and Son Two.

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Newly married, Pao wakes up one hour before David, drinks coffee, does her hair, makeup, and runs along a straight avenue back and forth seven times. She listens to overly loud music because her ragged breathing frightens her on these runs. She's not athletic, though she

aspires to be. They've just returned from a honeymoon in Switzerland and Greece.

When David wakes up, Pao, with blow-dry straightened hair, kisses his cheek and calls him *amor mio*. She holds many things against David but would never express these small grievances verbally. David, similarly, prefers to correct Pao indirectly, by way of anecdote, expecting her to pick up the morals of his stories and apply them to her own life, never communicating gripes directly. Like this, infrequently churlish and frequently ebullient, the married couple lives in complete ignorance of one another's caged, skittish, serrated hearts. And like this they could have gone for a lifetime, posting a sign over their doorway that read: patience, respect, humility! and volunteering their time at galas and food drives. However, David met Poppy. David collided with Poppy. David, who felt insecure for a time after the collapse of his electronic duo, now tilted his head back and said sarcastic things with an air of nonchalance. At the helm of a tech startup with a recent influx of investment capital, he was superstitious, lived at the behest of secret rituals (illegitimate child. semi-abandoned by his mother.). He kissed Poppy's left cheek, right shoulder (always. in that order.) before leaving her.

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New York. It was on the second floor of a bookstore near a winding staircase that needed a good vacuum, that Pao learned of Poppy and David. Her iPhone chimed. And with the delicacy of turning pages, she turned over the contents of Poppy's message with her eyes. "Never mind, I don't need to buy a book, let's go," she said to no one, because she was alone. It was a lovely blue French bookstore on the Upper East Side of New York City, hooded over Central Park. Pao, grown chubby from the birth of her second child, a decade younger than her husband David, now knows David is sleeping with a woman two decades younger,

Poppy.

Pao went directly, unthinkingly to a green bench across the street and sat before a bus stop, causing several passing buses to pull over for her. She stared disconsolately into the distance, and a biker's bell chimed as it crossed the street. Pao moved her face, as if avoiding the whip of air in his spokes or just trying to catch a face by looking up fast. There had been a burgeoning grace in her movements, trying to avoid calamities, but now in the harrowing aftereffects of betrayal she felt the sinews of her face stiffen. Oolong tea fell from her shopping bag onto the sidewalk and she left it there boxed, closed. Still unused.

Pao's eyes made her look like she was from a different country. She realized everything is empty. This park is empty, people having conversations about nothing is empty. Is this really life? This cannot really be life. Everyone was wearing red lipstick applied sloppily around their mouths. Incredible itchiness, loudness, fidgetiness. A million times outside her body. Too strong. The tongue of a Weimaraner (gray rogue) matched the pink leash lashed about a jogging woman's waist. The woman passed before Pao's eyes. The woman ran in pearls—calcified sea eyes like the sea stones collected by seven-year-old David along the Barcelona beach. Pao saw her life: a series of disappearing shorelines, shifting tides.

She could no longer stand to be in that house, that city. Her flight home (she was in town for a sorority sister's wedding shower in three hours) left the next day. She had the sudden strong feeling of wanting retribution. There was an inwardness to all of them, this whole shape of the affair becomes a shape around her within which her waking life whirled. She had the chance now to leave everything. An opportunity she had not known she wanted presented itself.

Gift.

Had she transgressed too? She'd been half of their marriage. Was it her fault? She looks at herself in a store window; she spent money when she went into stores. No, it couldn't be her looks. She remembers once going out into the ocean, the current pulling her, feeling afraid she'd moved, been pulled, so far to the side when she'd thought she'd cut a straight path. The water moves you. *Everyone must know*. She undoes her hair ties it in a knot goes into a store orders a hot coffee that comes out in a real mug, look: a heart drawn in foam. *Everyone must know*.

She breaks the glass.

5 *New Hampshire*

In the aftermath of car crashes, plain people pulled over, exchanged information, made amends. Poppy pushed on the pedal and drove away. What if it wasn't Mr. Lindley who'd been the whirlpool, but Poppy sucking people in, leaving destruction, or worse, nothing, in her wake? Poppy visited Athena in New Hampshire near the Appalachian Mountains. Athena arranged for Poppy to housesit. Old ladies with fruit-colored hair paraded grandbabies up and down the street and a Christmas tree garlanded a dumpster in town as if felled on fresh snow but it lay atop rotting fruit that looked like the misshapen heads of newborn children. Poppy was wanting to be in a secret language with someone or wanting to know someone who spoke her same language. If she had known her father in Spanish, how jolly he would have been inside the incorrigible expansiveness of the Spanish language, answering Poppy's questions by circling the drain.

Athena made frittata and left the labradoodles sitting under the table. Before she left she hugged Poppy two times, walked out, walked back in, hugged Poppy two more times. Real hugs. When Athena walked into the room, she and Poppy resumed conversations from years ago.

“Will you give some TLC to the pansies on the patio too please?” The doors swung open onto the patio. Athena had two patios, bowls for arranging fruit, jars for storing preserves and capturing homemade tomato sauces. There was a sign in the kitchen that read: LOVE LIVES HERE. JOY LIVES HERE. Adults, Poppy realized, played a fast-paced game of plastering over truths, the ugliness of life, giving it a livable surface. How much do we know to be true that we never dare confess aloud for fear its utterance would devastate the edifice of our lives? Concessions, confessions—there was no place for these in a smoothly functioning adult life.

Athena’s husband Leander cut glass and fused sculptures in the barn. Rose-rocket-dog-labradoodle was dying and Poppy had come to care for the dog in Athena’s absence, though the husband was perfectly able, perfectly there. The trip was arranged more for Poppy’s benefit than anything else, like practicality or convenience, and Poppy accepted, believing that granting Athena an easy, disposable outlet for her charitable nature was gallant on her part.

Athena knew about David, indirectly. Poppy betraying her was unfathomable.

Poppy found herself unprepared for two weeks of half-dark New England winter days, bundled in wool. Poppy had been instructed to leave the television on for the dogs if she must go out. It was a comfort to them. Poppy vacillated between Home Shopping Network and HGTV, both comforting, soothing voices palavering about prettifying persons

and places. Grey-green pumpkins tumbled outside the bright blue front door. Face of the house. Men in trees posed like Greek statues, arms lifted and legs bent to support themselves within the bends of tree branches. They wore no harnesses. They hung Christmas lights from the limbs of oak and red maple trees.

Poppy aimed to please the dog who yelped for her ball to be thrown into the freezing lake. Rose charged into water. The tennis ball splatted, the ducks cooed. Wild sunflowers wilted in the sun. A big kerplash, snorting, the dog gummed the ball in her mouth. “Good lady, good lady,” Poppy praised. Rose shook her sogging tail. “No, no, no,” Poppy cried. Rose barked until she procured another throw. She was chilled, panting, not ready to head home. It was freezing when Poppy walked past Leander, who wore shorts and a short-sleeve shirt, on the phone. Whenever Leander arrived home, he arrived talking on the phone. It was unclear if he ever made space for people to respond on phone calls. Leander craved constant human attention. Poppy wore a green sweater with acorns and dark corduroys and red ear warmers. Without looking at him, she felt the pull of attraction toward him. She remembered Athena all at once.

Leander took up with Poppy. Knots of tree roots clustered about in gray bouquets.

“Shorts?” she said.

“It had stopped raining. That is, snowing. I thought it would no longer be cold, which is stillness, it infiltrates, and you cannot see it.” The glare of sun reflecting off winter ice makes it impossible to see. Leander takes Poppy’s arm, “Here, let’s switch places. Protect your eyes.”

“How’s your glass work?”

“Want to have a look?”

“Let me grab my camera first.”

“I genuinely don’t think there’s much to snow. My work interprets ice.” If he was going to seduce her, he needed to establish a shared language.

“There’s a lot to learn from snow. Temperature and coolness. Falling.”

“Good. I was thinking that, too.” There was an emptiness, a surface quality, to Leander’s words that frightened Poppy. Because he appeared to be saying so much, but when she lifted the cover of those fluorescent words, there was nothing, no meaning. He spoke of his art in terms of *interpolated semaphores*.

Of the three cousins it is Luisa Poppy adores most. Poppy had always wanted a picking closeness with Luisa, had chosen her for it from the beginning, but it wasn't until Poppy had shown her prowess as a dancer that she won Luisa over. Luisa resisted Poppy but after seeing Poppy dance she gave into her picking intimacy, the exclusive friendship Poppy had insisted on beforehand by adamantly withholding her affection until Luisa gave her the full promise of best friend status. Luisa, in girl-awe of Poppy as Poppy was of Luisa for being the first to develop boobs, came to approach Poppy with a wary camaraderie.

Luisa was living nearby in New Hampshire—where Poppy held her hands in her sister’s sink, washing her cups with care, her forearms glistening with soap. Her hands numb from the cold, Poppy broke four of Athena’s plates. Luisa never made anything with her hands, but she now called herself an artist. Poppy went to visit Luisa at a lake house where she lived in an old brick building where Abraham Lincoln had supposedly dined. There was a birthing room intact in the house, though Luisa used it now not for birthing so much as for entertaining.

They went out in a canoe, silently. The lake was blue, the canoe wood hued. Luisa wore a fur hat with ear flaps. Her hair, cut short, reached the edges of the fur hat but no longer. The hat appeared a natural extension of her human form like bear ears: an adaptation to cold weather.

It is so much harder to confess sin in person, much easier to send loquacious messages over the phone or the world-wide web with its inter nets. Poppy used words to communicate the general idea of having slept with Luisa's father without explicitly saying as much.

Luisa might have pushed Poppy into the cold, freezing lake. Instead, when they are walking, snow melting in boots, Luisa lingers, allows Poppy to walk before her. She does not trust Poppy enough to turn her back on her. Poppy steps in front. Luisa digs her fingers into Poppy's shoulder (she's dirt), pushes her into snow. Poppy wounds her arm on a rock.

Blood blooms red on white of snow.

Fear not the too soon death of beautiful things.

Flowers.

"You're kidding me, right? Are you seriously that full of shit? You think I didn't know?" Luisa asks a series of questions containing their answers inlaid into the asking of them. They warrant no verbal response. Instead Poppy feels an urge to vomit. Where were the stars? Cloud cover. *Come out, come out.* A wind moves the clouds. Even the mountains fill with starlight.

Poppy had failed to realize she was just some girl arrived in the house to her cousins like countless other objects magicking their way into that house. She was no different to them from any flying, flock-tending winged thing: a pigeon or sparrow, say, something there to

shit all over their furniture and belongings then expected to fly away. “I am deeply hurt and wounded,” Poppy had supposed Luisa would say. She’d pictured Luisa crying in a fur hat. Luisa would not speak to Poppy following the lake. Poppy had never set out to burn all her bridges.

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Athena’s husband Leander laid his hands on either side of the dying dog’s ribs and absorbed her glass wisdom. Everyone in the room had blue eyes except Poppy: the dog, Leander, the sky coming in from the windows. It was like looking in constant pools of water. She’d believed God wrote to beloveds in the clouds, but if there was a language of clouds surely she’d been excommunicated. Leander’s eyes on Poppy’s legs at first made her uncomfortable like the pressure from a seatbelt around one’s neck or a heat lamp radiating. She swung her crossed leg back and forth overzealously in an attempt to rock herself out of embarrassment. Her feet felt funny in her shoes. She found Leander slightly pathetic, gliding on the edge of frenetic. He was joke-deaf (forced, frank, unfunny), ever-ready to supply answers to questions nobody asked, and perpetually sunburned everywhere except his eyes which he protected with sunglasses. He took long midday trail walks in the mountains near a pier overlooking a stagnant lake, which a beneficent freeze turned cold, caustic. Its crackling spurred Leander’s glasswork, which bore sculptural parallels to fractured ice.

There she was sitting across from Leander touching his shoulder in laughter, slivering her finger on the sharp wand of the air-conditioning vent, cutting it, dragging blood across the house, the freshly bleached linens, the taupe walls. The dog’s white foot. Not foot. Paw.

Cautious and sly, they formed a miniature garden from the seeds of flat jokes.

“I’m bored here,” Poppy said to Leander.

“There’s nowhere to go to not be bored.” Leander stretched his legs out, allowing Poppy to appreciate him in all his glory. A display of power. She wanted to dismiss him, but she felt an invisible hand forcing her, like David’s hand around her neck, to confront her own breathing. She cannot breathe for joy. Rejected by Luisa, Poppy wants nothing more than to steal Leander. Poppy wanted things she could not have. Things she could have she did not want.

“Let’s scrap the project,” Poppy said.

“Come back tomorrow,” Leander replied.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Can I take a picture of you?”

“Let’s do you,” he said. Like the click of a camera Poppy understands she can take him. In her exchanges with men she identifies this moment from her glance away and snap back to catch their eyes capturing an image of her face. She takes his hands and places them on either side of the camera. In seeking words to describe the act of image taking, she realizes that she was being forced to articulate a definitive position on a subject which she did not generally approach with language. In communicating the intentions behind her photographic process, she finds herself aligning her work with a certain field of photographers who worked on the margins. She loathed definitive positions (*never be pinned down in sex or art*) and abided by a series of inarticulate gestures and impulses in relation to the image. She imagines sliding a note under Leander’s door at night: *Come be alive with me*. She knows better than to leave physical traces. She locks the bathroom door and rests on cold tile. iMessage from Athena: red flower, blue door.

She goes into the kitchen for a glass of ice water in her nightgown. It is lateish. Poppy had hoped Leander would no longer be up. He was brewing tea at the stove in a kettle, his arms crossed patiently over his chest, fully clothed, including a navy belt with little ships.

“Tea?” he offered. Poppy wasn’t sure if he was being hospitable or if he actually wanted her to stay. She recognized that she would be forced to linger downstairs with him as she waited.

“Okay,” she said.

Cups clustered in the sink, physical evidence of mouths that had imbibed cool liquors and words that had flowed freely as a result. Tea had soon turned to nightcaps fond of gin.

“The most important thing to me right now is my brother,” Leander said.

“Why?”

“He’s so smart and patently kind.”

Poppy remembered being in the hospital after Athena had tried to kill herself after her high school boyfriend left her for Ella, how Poppy had not left Athena’s side, the hum of beeping hospital lights and glide of IV cords glistening like snakes as Poppy worked on her homework, a biography assignment for AP History. Athena had begged their parents to leave. She’d allowed only Poppy in the room, and as Athena slept (Poppy could not help herself; the terror of losing her), Poppy took photographs of slumbering Athena all the while avoiding her face. Athena’s wrist in a hospital bracelet, the edge of her hospital gown’s sleeve, the box of purple latex-free gloves and cotton swabs. This was the only time Poppy would capture Athena in weakness.

“It’s late,” she said now to Leander.

“Goodnight,” he smiled, though he could not hide the disappointment from his voice.

There is something worse than burning bridges: living in the fire. Poppy leaves for the airport the next day. Like any addict, she cannot be around her substance and abstain.

6 Paris

Poppy was settling in Paris after journalism stints in Buenos Aires, Merida, Lebanon, Rome. Roam while in Rome. Her succession of homes all bore the cramped unfamiliarity and temporariness of rental cars. Poppy had worked at the US Consulate and the English Language School. What she wanted always was that feeling of being somewhere slightly new. Somewhere where the drawers were never filled with personal belongings, because new belongings would arrive soon. Where she kept things light, in her mind, in her romantic relationships, and in her personal belongings. *What would a person with self-esteem do?* Poppy had asked herself. *She would move physically away.* She had moved away. And moved. And moved. Poppy where are you in space and time my love? Where do you wash your hands, your face? Gold glitter on her eyelids. She goes out in flowing skirts, heels.

When she packed her belongings, she packed in under thirty minutes. Her belongings were mostly clothes, trinkets. She held no sentimental attachments to mementos from her past. The one exception to this rule being a polaroid photograph of her and Athena as girls, faces before the saccharine pink of childhood bedroom walls, taped next to her coffeemaker. Just the sisters' faces: Athena's dimples.

She called Athena at noon, which was Poppy's lunchtime and Athena's pre-workout and pre-kids wake up time, while lunch-packing she could talk. The exchange was a varying dance:

"I thought I had to be alone to be free," Poppy said.

“You are alone,” Athena breathed into the phone.

“I don’t feel free.”

“Come home, Poppy.”

“You mean, L.A.?”

“No, I mean nearby Leander and me.”

“How’s the neighbor’s cat?”

“Still bothering Rose, but she’s just a wuss. She’s got to man up.”

“You mean woman up?”

“You know what I mean.”

What does it mean that Poppy wants to see all the cities, to touch walls built with different materials, to hold the world in her hands? Poppy had shifted from being new to here to staunch in her ways: her routine of walking to church each morning, midafternoon meditation, evening yoga, and mango chunks for breakfast.

Poppy had been living in Paris for seven months on assignment as the photography wing of a new online publication that curated travel recommendations for hip and cosmopolitan destinations. Her crapping out on commitments made her genuinely disliked. She wasn’t two-faced but, rather, conflicted in her orientation toward the expat life. Her job entailed attending gallery openings, art events, lavish parties, trendy bars, expensive boutiques with handmade arts and crafts, and booking reservations at the newest restaurants. The job interview was basically like: “Are you willing to sell your soul and commodify what you do?” And Poppy was like: “Sure, for the right price.” This was how she was on-boarded, welcomed with brio to the team.

If this sounds like a dream job, that is true. However, this was during a period in Poppy's life when she hated herself and sought to ruin her life through a series of self-effacements all revolving around betraying women and sleeping with inappropriate men. Her publication's other photographers, her direct colleagues, were both men, photographers from Iran and France respectively. Tehran and Michel. Both men described their taste in photography as catholic with a small "c." Poppy wished to respond, "I gravitate toward Catholic, with a big "C" images."

After her first assignment Tehran said to Poppy, making frame-hands around her face, "That's not too bad. Let me know if you want some pointers. I think you should refrain from imposing your point of view on images. We don't need to know how you see."

She would never move ahead at this organization because she was not a male journalist with an affinity for navy slacks and colorful handkerchiefs tucked into back pockets like flags.

Whenever a contemporary artist made an issue, Poppy and Tehran teamed up for the shoot. Tehran flung incessant questions about the industry at the artist being photographed.

"How did you get your gallerist? What's your cut at auction? Do you use Instagram as a marketing platform? What's your approach to interviews? Who's the biggest player right now in terms of art writing? What's your tagline?"

Poppy flushed at these questions, felt ashamed, and attempted to pivot to the artist's work. "What are you working on these days? Who are your influences? What's at stake?"

In a surprising reversal of character, Poppy behaved benignly at work saving her sauciness for sex with strangers and stealing. Tactful, she used bcc on her emails >>always. She was devoted to her job, but she was unsure if this was because it provided much needed

stability and structure in her life (the world is not collapsing) or if it was truly magical. The tenuous nature of her job (her assignment could be pulled at any moment) gave her life an improvisatory quality, as if she didn't fully inhabit her own body. She rented a flat month to month that came furnished and never bothered to unpack. When she did laundry, she folded her clothes back in to her suitcase. Packing, repacking a life. Perpetual preparedness to flee.

The work process went something like: an image pressed its body into her, she captured it. She took it to Ludo who told her, invariably, some version of: "Too much noise in this frame. Re-stage. Take it again." She loved that nothing she brought him was good enough. His callous rejection of her work turned her on. *Yes, sexually*. The eye roll was Poppy's silent tool she used to reckon with the mutability of men in journalism, who charted trends. There are forces that wear one down, that if one doesn't develop a mechanism of self-protection destroy with their incessant, perturbing iterations. Ludo decided he would be callous toward Poppy, which made her love him more. He was intolerant of weakness, as was Poppy, and he enjoyed a precision that made him uptight. He attempted to conceal his precision and neatness out of fear of being deemed un-fun.

He was decidedly un-fun.

He masked these qualities with a musical liquid love for language and a trenchant sense of humor that zeroed in on the character weaknesses of his coworkers. That he immediately identified Poppy's shortcomings ensured her devotion, for she, likewise, pinpointed him as a man in thrall to the legacy of his father and as self-obsessed as this father he outwardly rejected. In the muck and unpredictability of life a strange and unnerving event occurred, Ludo's father died. A wave of affection for Ludo washes over her. Intuitively. She's mistaken him, his feet pointing toward her. The shape of his face contains pure

longing. It was distasteful to go right back to living after his father's death. The guilt at having survived manifested itself in many ways. Social media posts that humbly bragged about mourning, excessive displays of emotion and compassion. He was a master of hashtags. #Be amazed. #This is your life. You can never move on. The gravel, the bench. The form of the sticks laid out over the ground. The fronds of the plant. On the verge of loss, he realized the mistake of his shyster-like ways.

He was renowned for an especially comprehensive listening, which had enabled him to ascend to senior editor. They worked in a weather-battered white house, shingled, with a red felt flag with the word LOOK scotch-taped to the front of their office fridge. Bicycles abounded outside the door alongside a rack of ribbons like the prayers and remembrances of milagritos outside a Mexican church. Bicycle bends glittered in the sun.

In photography, the exposed image reveals an element that appears unbidden, an interruption of the intended shot by a fleck of stray dust, a hair, a cloud that swoops in, a moving child entering the frame—these elements impose themselves on the image the photographer sets out to capture. An excess, a superfluity, a stray element appears, asks the taker to look once more, ascertain, resituate. These are photography's unintended exposures. Beckoning, see them.

Roses in the tall clay, clay pot. No window coverings. Panes of glass. Oranges in a bowl. (Decoration, not to eat.) She lifts an orange into her bag. Pristine hedges, the gardener comes four days a week. Appearing airlifted straight out of sixteenth century Italy, the house a relic. Preserved white benches. Seldom humans here. A crop of long-bodied dogs. Trim tails. She

hears the whap of tail hitting floor. When you enter the front door: an oil painting of a horse without a tail. A horse with a flirtatious cropped hair-do. Now we're at the work party.

Poppy stood before the building a good five minutes in her tan strapless bra peeking through her sundress lost in photos in her phone. Brown doc martens, long hair, Mexico City image of her aunt, same height. Long hair the color of blackened horse hay. Smoking, or, rather, letting the ash shiver down her sleeve, smear across her hand.

"You'll like him," Ludo said, "he's his own art." He spoke as if the interview were a done deal. "You're there to schmooze," he clarified.

"Come back with an interview scheduled. On it." She understood that despite being a photographer she was being sent for her capacity to charm: to finesse and cinch the interview.

Blu had out delicate lettuce canapes and baked mushroom tartlets and layered desserts in neat blocks for the private reception for his new exhibition. He was precipitous and non-inviting in his demeanor as he'd arrived at a stage of his career in which he was known by his first name, three letters, one syllable in the mouth: B l u. Poppy developed a mental image: lights flash, wet of sweat, someone licks salt from her neck, poppy colored wine spills down her white cotton dress. The thing she had spent her whole career working toward, photography, ceased to bear any significance to her moral, professional, aspirational or otherwise, and, thus unbound, she found herself attempting to fill this blank space with conversations and new feelings. But nothing can replace the flighty and unbound feeling of human dreams. She was tired of making images of ugly things and publishing them for people to see and celebrate for their exposures. The images she captured were reimaginings

of edges (countertop, heel of shoe, freshly-shorn hair, horizon, razorblade, bookends, fingernail, glass rim)— her obsession could not be tamed.

Women gathered around Blu, who sat on the grass, and they ascended the steps of the porch as if he were a priest, and they his worshipping his followers. The clouds like raked sand in the sky.

Poppy imagined his words and his face in bed.

Blu had no talent and no vision. All he had was a small-town social climbing sharpness to his personality, bad skin, ratty bleach-blond hair, and a shaved chest. He could be sweet in his probing questions, a scathing form of connecting. His art consisted of him painting nude images of himself before noteworthy pieces of art—insurrections, displacements, brandings. He'd moved up somewhat in the world and shed his old friends accordingly. He was an unforgiveable nerd and responded in phony highfalutin tones. He had been biding his time, as soon as he could produce the work of art that would propel him to the level of fame he hoped to garner he would laugh at life. He woke to paint at four am each morning. Residual fears of falling short had fallen by the wayside. He had a team constantly praising his efforts, stroking his ego. The change had been sudden. At one point he had been fumbling, awkward, and sullen, but his change in circumstances had precipitated a change in character, rendering him beholden solely to his talent.

Though Poppy was brought on to produce the images for the digital platforms of her publication, she spurned novel swiping modes of image making, photos of strange faces you said yes or no to, curations of lives through filters and angles, plates of food and vacations. She fretted over the future of her medium. Staunch, she still developed images in darkrooms. In darkrooms, she worked in red light. The light reminds her of clubs. She pushes the images

in watery developer. Slowly, an image appears beneath the watery surface. She is careful now, not destructive. Second tray. The image darkens. Third tray. Fixer. Red light on water. Exposure time. She rinses the final image in water. A purification—it removes all chemical residue. She hangs her photos on a pendulum of blue clips like an Alexander Calder mobile. Delight.

Blu was looking for the top cats and wanted to journey among them. This was a party Blu had refused to invite folks to, acting as though it were a secret, folded note. Because they were hipsters or somehow legitimately cool, partially because they were from Europe and partially because they simply were cool with their scant tattoos of smiley faces on their arms in a series of numbers and letters random like some prison stamp. Because they knew the codes, they could address one another ironically or not ironically about the future—the past. What do they make?

The thing is you're not playing at my level, Poppy wanted to say to Blu. Bored, she looked to her phone. An email with the subject line *We're Concerned About Your Mental Health* caught her eye, but, no, she was mistaken and found a message from her dentist awaiting her, a reminder she was overdue for a teeth cleaning— *We're Concerned About Your Dental Health*. Her cousin has posted an Instagram picture tagged: Taqueria La Eufemia en la playa de Tulum. Poppy leaves her a tart comment on the snap which reveals a taco before the white sand of virgin Tulum beach: *Como sufres. Ufffff me matas*. The blue of the sea like a fucking mirror reflection of the sky. There's a live-motion insta of Camilla jumping into Cenote Calavera. There's a frame where Camilla's legs are splayed, when the image, delayed, appears to be disintegrating. She disappears into a deep blue hole in the ground as if someone distilled sky into an earth socket.

“Auvergne was the title of the work,” said Nicolette in her unseasonal coat (though it was too hot the coat clearly said *I belong*) standing next to her husband who happened to be assigned to the Spanish consulate in France. He was known for his temper. When Poppy first met Nicolette, the information Nicolette brought to the forefront of their conversation was the name of a famed artist for whom she’d been a muse (said artist shall go unmentioned here but suffice it to say he was known for a certain propensity for photographic images of self-harm). Poppy knew Nicolette from afar they moved in the same artistic circles. They had had multiple blasé conversations without ever being formally introduced, until, finally, they exchanged business cards and met one evening for drinks. Nicolette had long blonde-white hair, always curled delicately at the ends. Walking up, nearing the old school bar downtown, she bore a blue knapsack that matched her eyes and an absolute scowl on her face. She had shown up thirty minutes late, though Poppy had shown up twenty minutes early, concerned twenty minutes was not early enough, making their arrival time off by an hour. Nicolette said:

“I am always angry.”

“Why are you so angry?” Poppy said. It was Nico’s natural temperament to be boiling over, subtly always on the verge. Poppy had seen her in one of these moods before. It was at a party as her partner attempted to soothe some abrasion he had unintentionally inflicted on her during a social gathering. Poppy attempted to get Nico to share her true story, but it was impossible. She already had a narrative in place, and she would not deviate. She knew her story.

Nicolette mentioned that she was like an artist she was curating in her current exposition, the showcase artist. That the central painting had to do with love.

“I just feel so blessed to have worked with him. Never in my life would I have dreamed that it would have been possible.” All black beneath her coat, both ridiculous and marvelous at once, she wore black pants and a tight pink top that read: women do matter. Poppy had immediately recognized Nicolette from her photographs online—she was often included in the society pages of publications adjacent to Poppy’s. She tasked herself with keeping herself apprised of what lenses and angles her colleagues used, backdrops, lighting. She perused their latest issues for comparisons and she had been struck by Nicolette, who appeared smaller in person, with her fluffy hair and black eyeliner. Poppy’s greatest gift (she was a chameleon, she could be anyone depending on the day) became her key. This was how she unlocked doors: she was the key that molded its shape to fit each lock. Nicolette had a firmness, which some read as dullness others as aloofness. Whenever Poppy steered the conversation away from photography toward recent promising shows, the woman swiftly segued back to business fundamentals.

“I’m terrified by the current state of the arts.” Nico’s hair was mussed and she radiated the ethereality of a dream. Her responses slow, chewed over, and produced like wads of gum. All of this laced with a perpetual smile that revealed dimples. Something about her dimples made it seem unlikely she would bend. She’d assumed an affectation intended to create an aura. Poppy had no time for auras, she was too busy surviving. The difference between Nico and Poppy was Nicolette had been born into the room. The coup for Poppy was simply standing in this home without anyone asking her to leave or mistaking her for a Latina server. Poppy was jealous of this woman. Because she was so beautiful, blue eyes, white hair, and natural and comfortable in her body, in her limbs. Poppy cannot charm anyone, for shame. She is missing herself as if whoever she was dropped out of her purse on

the street somewhere. It was one of those nights where in a room full of people, Poppy felt utterly alone.

“Can I give a toast?” she said jokingly.

“Toasts are gauche,” Nico said then walked away from Poppy. Fin.

Poppy had more in common with Nicolette than she wished to admit. Nico had spent years trying to gain a foothold in the art world. Nico had a hammock, liked warm weather. She showed up late to the soiree because she had been up the night before painting eyelashes.

If you forget to look at the sky, the world will not forgive you. Strings of desert grass caught in Nico’s hairdo. No bra. The proverbial shirt advertised tits. A cigarette ashtray buried behind the damp wooden bench held lips of many humans. Nicolette and her husband put their heads together and agreed: radio silence would be their signal—*we don’t care if you live or you die their message*. Dead crickets had collected in the ashtray. Poppy had picked at her cuticle and now her thumb bled through the white bandage she’d tucked around her finger.

“Can I help you with anything else?” Nicolette said.

“No,” Poppy said. She was preoccupied with avoiding staining her white dress with blood. The couple was leaving for Belgium the next day, Nico tipped in cash unzipped from her fanny pack. The bartender was patient. She didn’t recognize Poppy from the gallery (Nicolette, her name was Nicolette) at least she got that, she wanted to become this woman. Earlier Poppy had introduced herself to Nicolette’s husband and the first sentence he’d uttered had been “My wife is a curator.” As though he suspected Poppy’s intentions inclined toward the romantic not friendly. This was untrue but men assumed overtures of camaraderie were extensions of sex. Blu was the only one drinking now. Previously, he had loved the

margins of the art world, but now that he was a BIG NAME, he listed off the galleries he would accept showings of his work for and deemed all the rest unfit to present his major talent.

“The woman in the white dress. An artist, yes?” Blu said.

“Why do you ask?” Nicolette replied.

“I know her work.”

“Photographer. Paris transplant of an online publication,” Nico said.

“Name?”

“Petunia or Pansy. Some tacky flower. She wants an interview.” Blu would fall into obscurity within a few years. He had inappropriate borders and chalked it up to radical modes of living but really his conversation was hemmed in by a somewhat limited intellect. He could not decipher when it was appropriate to share information.

“Introduce us.”

Poppy’s face exposed an utter lack of respect for him (she felt he was a total joke as a human, pure image). “What are you working on here this year?” she said.

“How do you like your work?”

“How do you like *your* work?”

“No, love. I asked you.” *His leg keeps grazing mine.* She was confronted with the impossibility of mutual understanding between them: why waste true conversation on sillybilly *him*? She found his opinions on art to be wafer thin, lacking. As soon as he turned his back, she would dump his comments in the bin. When people asked how you felt about something they didn’t really want to know, only, they were testing to see if you knew how to be political.

“What do you think of the show?”

“Sumamente interesante, muy monumental, todo es demasiado amplio. La exposición es una exposición oblige. Piezas muy exclusivas.”

“Bullshit.”

“What I think of your work is that it’s all surfaces.”

“Proud, proud is how I feel when I hear these criticisms. That’s exactly the point—it’s all surfaces. Clearly, you’ve reached the apotheosis of your critical praxis. I give you permission to use drugs or do whatever it takes to induce a flow state while in Paris. How you fill my heart.” He had a boundary up, except when he sensed you might be worth paying attention to, in which case he pivoted and became open and ingratiating.

“If I spend enough time with you, you’ll end up in my photographs,” Poppy said. The dancers were so aware of their bodies they absolutely shook in the eaves. A drunken dancer was tussling about with the human element. She ran up to fellow dancers and attempted to engage them in body play. Dance was their language. With hands, she communicated her friskiness.

“Your boss is all about the byline.”

“He’s an editor who values photography.” Blu looked away, momentarily. He imagined variable meanings.

“What’s this guy’s name who you work for?” Blu said.

“Does it matter? Are you going to Google him?” Poppy said.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Go for it. Ludo.”

“My work explores the edges of things.”

“I’d like your work to explore non-human geographies,” Blu said, “I live now in SF and commute to LA during the year where I’m dating a Playboy bunny. She was the June issue.”

“What are her ears like?”

“My current project, however, is to master the art of tightrope walking.”

“The art of what?” It took the restraint of a saint for Poppy to maintain her strident smile and not fall on the floor in flippant laughter, *what the fuck*. She was judgmental, jubilant, jealous all at once. To live one’s life walking on a near invisible line in the sky—had this not been her most constant and abiding dream? Blu was gauging her reactions to his responses as he described the figures in his recent panting, their position, three panels, nudes, from behind.

She scrolled through her Instagram feed on her camera phone.

“It’s fortunate you received an invitation. We pruned the list.” There was once again the dangerous road open before her, the road she had travelled down before. She had other options. She could see them, but she could not choose them. We do not choose who we are, Poppy thinks, pulling her shirt over her head—for a moment her arms flutter—demon or dragonfly wings.

We only are.

Poppy wakes with her arms crossed over her body like a corpse laid out for viewing. She flicks her eyes at the ashtray beside Blu’s bed with a tiredness otherwise known as wisdom. The room smells gorgeously of weed. Because she cannot remember last night, she undertakes the task of imagining Blu’s words and face in bed, once more. She does not know

the translation for shame in French. “I feel becoming,” she says, locating a truer accuracy in her mistranslation. She feels as if some valve has been released. She picks up her camera and without looking at the old images photographs the edges of Blu’s bed. She cannot stop circling, each time she captures the entire periphery of sheets, her panties, Blu’s shoe, a striped sock, she finds herself again caught in the groove and circles again. In particular, there is one corner of the bed she cannot stop photographing, on it a streak of cigarette ash and a red cotton bracelet tangle with Blu’s hair. She cannot keep quiet about it, “How magnificent.”

“Don’t be special,” Blu says. Sloppy words. “I have wasted my life trying to make things out of images,” Blu says, “It’s all incredible bullshit.”

He stubbed his cigarette out on the cactus beside his bed.

“It’s always been a question of, how far are you willing to go into the abyss? And what as a result must be destroyed?”

In Blu’s bathroom Poppy feels the familiar weariness of waking up in an unfamiliar space, the slug of toothpaste on her finger, slapping hand soap on her face, a towel from the laundry basket. Waking up to the wreckage, she wishes she had been lucid enough to clean up the night before. She steps into his beautiful shower (too hot, her skin cracks) to try and wash away her shame. Her vision blurs. Onset of a hangover. She pocket dials Ludo leaving him a message. Car tires passing on stones. She hangs up with quick thumb presses. The concrete walls of the bathroom, *trés chic mon amour*, loom like prison walls.

“Can you please give me a ride home?” She texts Blu from the floor of his stone open-shower bathroom. She hears street sweeping from down below. Cool air from the window.

iMessage: You didn't think last night meant something, did you?

Blu drops Poppy off three blocks from her place. She walks down the cobblestone street.

You are safe. You are free. You are safe.

Poppy repeats these words to herself throughout her life hoping to rewrite her internal transcript. She navigates to her place using markers: go straight past the small chapel, turn right at the purple bougainvillea, unlock the door next to the white SUV and body guards, walk up the spiral steps. She arrives home with a bruise on her shoulder and her mailbox will not open. Frustrated, she sobs. *You are sick.* (Knowing this does not help: like stealing, being screwed up makes you screw more.) She breathes into a paper bag. Lathers her face in lavender scented dish soap. Floral disgrace. Washes her face in the unfamiliar kitchen sink. This is her sink. Is it? What is this sink? She does not recognize this place as her apartment. She has lived here.

None of her belongings stand out. There are seven sheets of paper and a tired camera its leather strap hanging from a hook in the wall. There is nothing familiar here. *I do not recognize home in this edifice.* She takes her camera from her bag (her instinctive move in times of turmoil) and turns it on to remember. The device produces an image. The image that comes out is not the one originally presupposed. There is an element unaccounted for, imposing itself, an unremitting figure. It is a female figure. She holds her arms in close. As if she felt herself at risk of being exposed. The woman (who is she?). Poppy does not recognize the woman in the photo. Without her wounds, who was Poppy? Naked windows crying. The room smells of rain. Light changes temperature. Her face smells like airplanes on early morning flights. Half-dark and dawn.

The woman's dress is wine-stained. (We hope it is wine.)

"I may need some help," she tells the bottle of lavender soap beside her farm sink.

But, no. She will not get help. There are images she refuses to develop.

Negatives are reversed images of originals which reveal light, shade, and color value.

They can be used to produce a positive image.

"I landed the interview," Poppy claimed upon bursting into Ludo's office.

"Really?" While he believed her claim, Ludo likewise believed she had gained said interview by non-kosher means. Mistrust blooms in the minds of those that betray trust.

"You're quite out of the ordinary in your determination to capture images using underhanded means," Ludo said. (It was not apparent to him who was the smarter of the two. He felt she knew something about life he did not know. This was true. In living dangerously, one accrues a certain fatal knowledge of fuckedupedness. He was quick with words but slow at understanding unspoken dynamics between humans, a corollary of his over-assuredness).

"And you're blighted in your career," Poppy said.

She knelt before Ludo and took both of his hands in her hands. The vase of tiger striped tulips set carefully on the low woven bench before Ludo's desk bowed their heads. Some lifted themselves up, orderly, others inclined away from the cluster as if they grew naturally wayward, even if this direction meant away from the light that came in strongly early afternoons through a rectangular window behind Ludo's desk, making Ludo appear radiant even when under stress.

She brought Ludo's hands to her lips.

Hands that deny her.

“I love you,” she said.

Did she love him or want to be him? Was there a difference?

“Life is not a game.” Ludo said. It was not that he had not had affairs before.

He refuses *her, her*. Refuses her silly flower name and desperate affection.

“You are looking for love in all the wrong places.” He stood up from his desk, took his briefcase in hand, flipped off the light switch.

“And, frankly, it’s painful to bear witness to your self-induced suffering.”

“You have been leading me astray,” Poppy said.

“What makes you think I’ve been leading you?”

“I’ve been following you, regardless.”

“I think it’s rotten when people use their photography as therapy.”

“What makes you think I’ve been using you?”

“Pardon?”

“I said what me makes me afraid of losing you?”

“Get out of here. It’s been a long day, Poppy.” She fiddled on the threshold. “I would like to be CEO one day,” Ludo added.

“It sounds like you’ve found your belonging. It’s so hard to find one’s belonging.”

“Look, get some rest.”

“You have everything I want in life, why are you being mean to me?” Oops, she did not say these words, but she thought these things.

“There’s been a spate...” she tried to say something; only her words knew what.

“Bye, Poppy.” There was a cloudiness, a haze or film, between her and Ludo: the residue of a fight. Poppy took her fingers and wiped it off.

“I’m sorry,” Poppy said. Poppy stood from her kneeling position, thankfully, before Tehran banged in with a handful of freshly unpackaged camera lenses.

“Look,” he said and held a lens to Poppy’s eye, then Ludo’s face.

“Were you born in Tehran?” Poppy said.

“Shiraz. You?”

“The West Coast.”

“Portland, San Francisco?”

“L.A.”

“Figures.”

“Your buzz cut sucks,” Poppy said.

She walked out without saying goodbye.

“What does she have?” Tehran said, privately confirming his view that female photographers were too emotional to succeed. They could not approach their images with sufficient calculation. They attempted to connect with their subjects on an emotional level.

“She’s been listening to too much Billie Holiday,” Ludo explained.

“Who?”

“The East Coast.”

“Ah.”

Poppy felt terribly shut out, misfit, malformed. There was some quality to Ludo’s tone which signaled rejection not just of her offer of herself but of her as a person. She was imaginative and could foresee all the ugly ways this iteration of her habit would play out. There was no pretty manifestation of her devotion to him. Resentful sex, silence, guilt, blame, marriages broken, children distraught, tears, berating one another over things like

spilled OJ and unfolded laundry. She knew, because she had play-acted the banality of being the other woman before. And to deal with that; to react to that; to understand that she inflicted suffering. The nature of her destruction left her like an island, locked in by water, drowning. Only everyone else was landlocked and could not understand why she felt constantly underwater. It's like this, she felt, vastness all around blue and sky and ocean. There is nothing as trapping, don't you see?

Words, like photographs, hold surfaces with an intended image, and backgrounds full of unintended exposures. Ludo's placid professionalism masked sentiments behind his words—our relationship no longer holds any significance to me outside of this business transaction. Power does not exchange hands in big, well-lit rooms. It takes place in intimate lamp-lit spaces, the private office or bedroom. The adults are deciding. *Children steer clear*. Who was he responsible for? His family? Or the morning light on the wall, Poppy's left hand on his chest? It was not apparent to Ludo who was the smarter of the two. He felt she knew something about life he did not know. This was true. In living dangerously one accrues a certain fatal knowledge of fuckedupedness). Poppy was at a point in her life in which she rejected herself.

Her life had been a series of transgressions captured on film, her subsequent exposures. Poppy's pictures were her proofs: I am real.

I have survived.

It was at this point that Poppy's apartment was broken into in the middle of the night while she had been away laughing over pommes frites and Old Fashioneds in the 19th

arrondissement. She lived on a busy corner with transparent, finicky windows that had to be sliced open like envelopes from years of hardened paint. She arrived home to find her belongings strewn about, her photographs scattered, her clothes left out, a box of tampons next to her computer cord. Nothing had been stolen. The space reeked of cigarette smoke as if someone had spent time exploring her things before deeming none of them worthy of taking. She was forced to confront that what she felt, violated at having had someone forcibly cross boundaries she wished would have remained, was one she had brought others to feel. This is a terrible feeling, she thinks. I cannot believe I have made people feel this way often before. She called her colleague Michel. He had police training. He asked to photograph the scene. Poppy submitted to his wishes.

Michel, married with a boy Étienne and three Pomeranians, was quieter in clothes and words than Tehran. Poppy had been fascinated by Tehran and assumed him to be the superior photographer based on his quirky attire, frequent invitations to parties, and snide remarks, but, in time, she came to realize it was Michel who deserved her attention as he worked quietly, with intention, and without focus on the art market. Never having partnered with Michel on a photography project she observed his practice when he photographed her wrecked apartment, isolated, the wall, neutral. His refusal to talk to her during the shoot, his sanctimony as he lifted and repositioned objects and his near denial of her presence awed her into acquiescence.

“Why are you moving my chair so slightly?”

“Not now,” he said.

“Can we discuss later?”

“Turn toward me,” Michel said. Poppy sneezed and Michel looked at her with irritation. She had moved during the shot. He worked with film not digital. He could not check his images to see what he had captured maintaining connection with his subjects throughout his shoots. Later, this would be the frame he sold. Poppy blurred. Poppy looked away from the disdain in Michel’s face. No, it was her own self-disdain reflected in Michel’s hurried glance. She frowned at her own mediocrity in comparison to his quiet appraisal of the architecture of her apartment.

Certain people, like a favorite dress for going out, mark the eras of our lives with their distinctive flash and color. At the art museum on Halloween, a woman in heels came and stood beside Poppy. Her name was Kristy Anne and she would become Poppy’s best friend. She and Poppy gazed at the same painting. Neither of them moved. Neither of them breathed. Neither of them spoke. It must have been no longer than a single sweep of the second hand around the face of a clock that the woman stood inches from Poppy’s right shoulder sleeve, yet this minute repeatedly bloomed throughout Poppy’s life like a bulb plant resurfacing its intimacy annually. Kristy Anne took upon herself the enormous task of reinventing herself. She did not talk about her past before moving to Paris and here, now, she did the bold, beautiful thing of not making up an alternate history for herself as one could easily manage living in some foreign country. She lived as if her life had begun just one summer ago when she’d moved to Paris to study French cooking. Kristy Anne moored herself to a motley crew of friends drawn from her cookery class.

“Where is your family?” Poppy said.

“What family?” Kristy Anne responded. She was alone. She came from a place where nobody listened. Where to be heard you had to be loud. If you wanted attention YOU MUST SHOUT. “It occurred to me that I had escaped something. That I had escaped something very bad,” was all she ever revealed in response to Poppy’s probing:

“But *why* did you leave Oklahoma?”

“To be free,” she would say.

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I want to tell you my story. I flew Oklahoma. Freak song. Hillbilly. Land of lows and attics. One night I was sitting on the bathroom floor the ceiling had just collapsed from the room above. The ceiling, the ceiling. I sliced whole grapefruits in the palm of my left hand. There was no space in my life to be human. I had seven smaller brothers and three older sisters. I was sixteen. I got on a train and changed my name from Kristy Anne to Rosemary. I took up with new and renewed strangers who wielded pocket knives like the talons of wolves. “You just fucked up big time,” my mother said when I told her I got kicked out of school for skipping class caught tagging the archway outside the nun’s auspices. There was a fake diamond earring on mother’s floor. I remember because it reminded me of ice and candy. When frustrated my mother made a move to look at the cadre of folks in our vicinity. My brother had murdered our father. This was all there reflected in the fake diamond on the floor. He would be forever in prison. This was all there reflected in my mother’s voice: “You are fucked up Kristy Anne.” Slide of the *are*. That night I tucked a flowered scratchy sweater and moon blue nightie into a duffel and hitched myself to the departing train. At night, the clink over terrain in a train car filled with fresh flowers. A thousand roses and I hurtled through the night. Sick with dread, my mother, my departure stopped her heart. Once you

leave OK there is no going back. The story sounds worse than the memory deems. In some versions the train cars are full of butterflies. In the real version the train cars are full of hobos, hurlers, empty egg crates like firewood, a sack of puppets, a rattlesnake to remind you of the graveyard. In my version I choose— always, the butterflies. Always. The roses.

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Kristy Anne lived around the corner from Poppy in a studio with two door mats. She was mixed, like Poppy, only Kristy Anne was half black and half white. Their friendship flourished primarily on the shared intricacies of wearing their faces. Instead of taking solace in their shared mutual experience, they became more racialized, more distinctly *other* around one another. They had the conversation only women with curly hair could have—how do you keep your locks so smooth? Her best assets were her legs and thus K.A. rocked super short shorts. This was key to her popularity on Tinder. The sole talisman of Kristy Anne’s less than pristine and wholesome past was her countrified name: *Kristy Anne*—double whammy of twang that fit her like her cat eyeliner, gap tooth, tattoo in white ink on her wrist: *love* like some burn. A mottled pinkish scar. “Thank Jesus for the world,” she was prone to say sans irony, biting into a crepe or shawarma on the street. Pureness of heart pooled in her eyes. Her words revealed her to be decisive, smart (street variety), hard but not so hard as to be jaded. Kristy Anne was a relief and beacon of hope to Poppy since she’d incinerated her baggage and this gave Poppy a method for a life cleanup.

One night Poppy was in pain, on the verge of tears, and Kristy Anne stuck a finger in her costume earring and pivoted away in disgust. She had never and would never express sympathy for Poppy’s predicaments whether self-inflicted or outwardly foisted upon her. Yet, still, whenever this woman felt tremors in her life Poppy rushed in with swaddlings.

She'd somehow snagged her foot in the roots of Kristy Anne's reach (originally it was a certain poise and placidity in social situations that prompted her to devote herself to K.A.). This unevenness, this lack of reciprocation, made their friendship doomed to fizzle out over a tiff or a freeze out.

Poppy went through a period where she made many images of Kristy Anne, capturing her likeness from multiple angles. Look: an image of Kristy Anne dancing. Arms blurry like wings. Here she stands, stretching. Poppy wants to be Kristy Anne dancing. She vows to cease developing images. Alas, images churn: Kristy Anne in her underwear, donning a shorts tan.

Poppy and K.A. had experienced a bad LSD trip at a music festival together. Going through that experience did not bring the women closer, instead, having seen one another at their worst, it had made them unwilling to acknowledge their weakness. K.A. lifted information from Poppy's life and pulled it out at inopportune times. Poppy had been betrayed by Kristy Anne multiple times. It was a hair pulling kind of friendship: *I will braid your hair and pull too hard while doing it. Look how pretty.* (Here as in other places I will give you a reverse account of this human relationship—the pillowcase turned inside out, as it were—K.A., having been hurt before, was appropriately self-protective around Poppy as she intuitively labeled her a destroyer).

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How often do we mislabel a survivor as someone warranting guilt? –their strange way of inhabiting the world belying not ill-intention but some doglegged method of keeping alive.

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At some point in Poppy's life she realized that wandering about these always new cities, eventually she'd wander into someone true. She saw this someone in the park and made to keep walking past him. "What are you doing here?" he asked as if he owned the park. Poppy looked radically different from day to day. She pulled the plug out of the bathtub and pulling up this topper, released her life down the drain. She wondered if home was giving yourself away bit by bit down drains and vacuum cleaner portals. That weekend she was preparing a weekend getaway to Portugal. And, anyway, how could she? She didn't speak the language. No matter. The only thing left to do was meet Ryo for a coffee. A friendly coffee. They hadn't slept together though they'd been meeting for coffee for many weeks now.

"Almond cortado," he ordered. "Oh, that's nice," he said. Sipping. Stirring.

How had he become so satisfied with himself? He had gone to boarding school. He was an apathetic rich kid. He had gone to private school. This trajectory had somewhat defined his life. The lunch would be professional almost. No touching or even suggestive laughter or glimpses into one another's souls. It would be sanctimoniously cold with both parties eyeing the door in gestures of self-preservation and subconscious maneuvers of speeding up time. But what did she know? She knew everything. About Ryo, that is. He was brilliant, for starters. For starters and ends because this perspicacity defined Ryo, currently pursuing a M.D./Ph.D. on full academic scholarship. Ryo who had attended Brown, loved Wagner, played the piano, was over 6 foot 2 inches tall. Wore glasses, did yoga, and won at debate every year of his life. He was never a teacher's pet though, no, he was too smart to be anyone's pet. Poppy had reconverted to Catholicism after many years away, lapsed. Ryo, who growing up had overheard his mother swapping superstitions over the phone with her

mother in Vietnam, rode his bicycle to the hospital reciting the year of scientific discoveries. He had faith in science not religion.

Ryo's mother had the habit of posting photos of her sons to Facebook. She was proud of her sons' handsome good looks. As Ryo felt increasing despair over his inability to fulfill his life goals thus far, his mother posted a photo of him in an untucked tuxedo at his father's company gala beside a vase of red roses, his mother's red lipstick smiling in maternal song.

"There is nothing I want more," he'd said to his mother when she chided him for being sleep deprived, unsociable, and uncharismatic to attendees, namely, her older Vietnamese friends who wished for Ryo to flirt kindly with them before their spouses' tired eyes. Ryo had woken up at 2AM for studying. He was aiming for medical school on full academic scholarship, nothing less. If he didn't get into medical school, he would surely kill himself. He would never say this out loud, but he was certain he could not bear the shame of communicating rejection to his mother and father. He had a schizophrenic grandfather, a leftover from the Vietnam War. He felt a certain harrowing kinship with this grandfather, what if illness flowed through his blood?

Ryo walked around the gala room to find his father, though his reasons for seeking his father were complicated. He wanted support from his father, but he dared not seek it directly. He wanted, also, to be around his father's aura to soothe his jittery hands as he lit a cigarette.

On the day Ryo and Poppy shared coffee, children in the park were discussing seriously the methodology of braking on the kids' plastic bicycle on which they took turns steering around the red clay circle. And the wisdom of braking before rolling down the hill was imparted from one child to the other child in order to protect him. The whole long story

of Ryo's life was there on his face, accounted for. Ryo enjoyed the street cred of dating an ethnically ambiguous woman and liked to hold his wrist next to Poppy's to compare skin tone.

Because Poppy seemed most attractive to Ryo when she seduced other people, he decided to introduce her to his brother Ned. Ryo and Ned were Vietnamese, their parents, refugees from the Vietnam War. The brothers were mean to each other but their meanness spoke of a kind of affection and a having attained some level in which being mean, not in a silly but in a clever way, signaled having risen above the need for petty ego stroking. Electric bolt.

"I'm glad you took that job," one brother, Poppy's boyfriend Ryo, said.

"Well, I just stayed on," said Ned, who worked on the Editorial Board of the NY Times. Foreign Affairs. "Nobody gives a shit," he said of his promotion.

"I give five shits. I google you all the time," Ryo responded.

"Five shits is a lot."

"Is the ground shaking?"

"No. Why?"

"Because, you're here."

"What happened to the prodigal son?"

"He is staying put. His family might eat him for dinner. Like they roast them all."

"Is that tradition?" Though Poppy was dating the older brother, Ryo, he looked younger than Ned and aligning himself with public expectations of his behavior, had been slower to mature. "We're not quitters in this family," Ryo said. Poppy was not new to this subtext game. She felt, finally, here are people in the room playing at my level. The

untrustworthy, the humans with words and then words beneath the words (ulterior motives): she was among them.

“Poppy’s an attractive piece,” Ned said. A birthmark on his wrist slipped out of his shirtsleeve.

“That means a lot coming from you Nerd.” She was in the room. *Did he just call me a piece?* She sensed the palpitations of an unattractive politics in the brother’s verbal exchange. She was a card played between them or a prize given to the winner. She could not tell which. When you’re young, you don’t know where you fall into people’s understanding of the world, on the scale of their life. She imagined then that if she had once been a minimal, small marker on the chessboard of life, somehow, she’d become a heavier player. She was the same shape and size but her piece had increased in value.

“Poppy’s looking for a new place. Isn’t there a unit in your building Nerd? Check it out.” On the surface of Ryo’s move was: *I feel so superior to you I do not worry about you stealing my woman.* Beneath his move was: Where relationships are concerned, Poppy is attracted to the illicit more than the licit ones. The winner of this exchange was: *yet to be determined.*

Ned brought Poppy a bottle of red wine after she moved into his building but refused to step inside for a drink. She placed the bottle on her coffee table triumphantly. It meant here she was someone who knew her neighbors. Who could call and knock for sugar. She didn’t cook but that was still something one could do, that she could do, surely. There was a large triumphant glass. She felt somehow more than and less than a clear self. Red flower.

When you went into Poppy’s apartment, there was nothing there, nothing on the walls, nothing anywhere. It was bare. She feels more herself here than anywhere else. She

hangs something on the wall, a butterfly. It is so simple, really, the wood floors, the two ceiling fans. But she has never felt more like herself. When she looks in the mirror, there she is. Herself. If before she was in a state of becoming, now, like a butterfly, she has become. Her upstairs neighbor's music, which fell down in an invisible waterfall, tingled musically on her scalp. Undefined words and melodies cascaded below in an unsolicited soundtrack to her life. When she looked down at her foot on her linoleum floor she was reminded of her foot on all floors in all countries, her same foot, the many floors, cold and wet and warm and mud. She found the gasoline that spilled over her foot and the mail that stopped being delivered to be portentous. *In the morning there is a quiet around my apartment, and the quiet reminds me of the quiet center inside of a bright orange nasturtium, and the quiet reminds me of the quiet of church naves. And the quiet brings on the morning, and the breaking of the quiet brings on the day. And the first car humming is my rooster and the last car turning away is my goodnight kiss. And the sounds of spoons and French on tongues in the bistros that spill out onto the streets are day. And all through the day there are meetings: the kiss behind the ear reminding me of Mexico. From the quiet comes children screaming. They are riding the carousel. From the quiet comes the stories told in unknown languages; we do not orchestrate human voices for you here. From the quiet comes God's fury in the tune of clashing cathedral bells. They ring, unsynchronized hubbub.*

She would walk to the bakery and buy a baguette on Sundays, which she would toast directly atop her gas stove and often set aflame. Pats of butter and blobs of blackberry preserves. When Poppy opened the glass door of the boulangerie the bell that hung from the door clinked. The owner spoke Italian, not French, and this linguistic frisson made his bread tastier, Poppy supposed. At first French feels leaden on her tongue, then, carefully, she takes

her hands and makes a space inside the language for her words. Inside the glass of her shower she inhales French and exhales the day. She has come home even if it's to a home to which she will never belong. Mornings she would sit out on the roof and watches the pale giantess monarch visiting the pear tree. Face level with the tree's fancy hairdo, Poppy brewed espresso in a stovetop silver Bialetti. The body guards next door marked her comings and goings. She rented next to a foreign consulate and a bookstore (look inside now) a woman turns the sodden pages of *Franny & Zooey* in a magenta map-printed skirt, removes her yellow eyeglasses, massages the bridge of her nose.

Poppy saw Ned walking around his dazzling light. She looked away from Ned, him and his dazzling white light. She knocked on his door and he opened it, that's all. There was something about the casualness of his phrase: "Sit tight, sugar," that pulled her in deep. Ned had a wooden animal head hung on his wall. Poppy sees his moves doubled with his brother's moves. What she had found in Ryo to be charming, was caressed, full of grace in Ned. Beside Ned, Ryo was: pocket change. No big deal. Act rash. Like: someone she had thought was a flower becomes not such a flower. She thinks: Oh, no *this* is the flower I want to pull.

The world is full of flowers. Poppy was rash but not stupid.

"He's one of the most self-centered, unfair assholes I've ever met," Ned's brother, Ryo, said of Ned, closing the door behind them that night. He lived in a square apartment with a square bulldog. "Our dad is a narcissist. That's where gets his rigmarole over his important job," he continued. "I've got a dinner at 7:30, so let's be quick." He sat Poppy on the table to be quick with her and she pretended he was Ned to be quick with him. *Right back*

at you <bad word>. The relationship between Poppy and Ryo had become normal. It made Poppy sick.

She was clinging not to his goodness nor his looks but to his normalcy.

“I need some time to think,” she said. She had never been more alone than she was during that pocket of supposed togetherness that constituted their relationship.

“You’re not going to think for a year, are you?”

“No.” This was true. She’d already made up her mind. Travel books cluttered his table and framed images of vintage political propaganda adorned his hallway. His decorative kitsch made her uncomfortable. It suggested an inability to revere things sacred. She left.

Door slam.

While Poppy dreamed up sick ways to dump Ryo for Ned (phone their mother; fuck Ned at Ryo’s place and have him catch them in his square bedroom; selfie stick sex pics), she set him up with Kristy Anne to ostensibly place him out of bounds, to delimit him as off limits, like a skull and crossbones sticker stuck on a bottle of poisonous liquid. At the same time, she could maintain a much-wanted proximity to him through Kristy Anne. Poppy’s misguided foray into matchmaking *was* toxic, however, for Kristy Anne and Poppy swapped sex stories on the regular. Kristy Anne introduced her latest beaus by first and last name, Tod Mitchell, Jean Mercier, blowing menthol in Poppy’s face. Kristy Anne answered questions with *technically, certainly, generally*, to LY her way out of having an opinion. Flighty, she sucked on her hair.

The brothers and Poppy and K.A. went on a double date to a tapas place where Ned waved to friends. He went to restaurants where they would run into people. Ryo instagrammed photos of the patterns of food portions on his plate, of him and Poppy kissing.

“I’m so happy with my life,” K.A. said without prompting. Poppy wanted so much to believe her that she nodded her head. “I realized this morning my calling in life is to heal.”

Yazia, the waitress, was farsighted but refused to wear glasses. When she served, she squinted to make out the daily menu scrawled across a chalkboard. She wore hay-colored hair all caught up in the apron tied about her waist. She was hired to give the place the right look. At twenty-six she had gotten braces and selected fun, zesty colorful rubber bands. Yazia’s job required patience. The pane of light slanted sharply over her face. She was pristine in her pale privilege. Her hair had been perfectly rolled out. She was delicate, giving one the impression that she might fumble but a brief conversation revealed her to be fully in command of her language.

“She’s a whack,” Kristy Anne remarked about Yazia, who had married at twenty. At twenty-two she took a part-time job waitressing and volunteering at a local literacy organization to avoid spending time with her husband. She was known to flirt with other people’s wives.

“Come here. I love your leather pants,” Kristy Anne told Yazia, who boasted about her thrift shop find. Poppy knew Kristy Anne hated Yazia’s leather pants, that she was, in a matter of speaking, taking a piss on Yazia without her ever knowing. Kristy Anne and Yazia texted mock nice. The quantity of emoticons and exclamation points in the texts they exchanged made them genuinely insincere. Hearts meant the opposite of hearts.

Poppy pictured Yazia drunk on the floor of a grafittied bar, picking up the wrong purse in the ladies’ room, aggrandizing her own drunkenness with references to “Fuck I’m fucking loaded as fuck.”

Blue turban slash head wrap before a bowl of green seaweed.

Kristy Anne, Paris, November 3

If you are a person who was formerly trapped, you will constantly seek escape routes. Poppy identifies all exits. Her legs twitch, her muscles ready, geared to flee. She was drowning, unable to breathe, in her jealousy over Ned. What made it worse was his naturalness with Kristy Anne, the way he touched the small of her back when they walked.

“In my defense, I had a lot to drink,” Kristy Anne said.

“You got really lit up,” Poppy said.

“Did you buy a hammer to hang your shoreline photos?” Kristy Anne said.

“Can’t I use a shoe?”

“If you must know, she does freelance, women’s columns,” Yazia informed them.

Apparently, she knew another woman living in Paris also named Poppy. No longer nominally special, Poppy imagined this other woman wearing her name, walking around the city, eating caviar and spending too much on silk sheets, acting in sheer pursuit of pleasure.

“Got any stories about Kristy Anne?” Absentmindedly, Kristy Anne caressed her curl, gelled tendril of hair. Kristy Anne was the center of attention that night because the men mistook her evasiveness for compelling nonchalance. In a few days’ time this profound inner beauty would reveal itself to be nothingness and the accompanying panic and shock of being swindled overtook her admirers.

“She dated a man for three years and every night she texted me that she hated him.”

Kristy Anne kicked Poppy under the table. Poppy moved her leg away. There was no shared

understanding. Kristy Anne was surface: beautiful surface even in her depths. Talking to her was like throwing pennies into a well where they drowned and disappeared.

“My bra is bothering me,” Kristy Anne said as she removed her bra from beneath her camisole with a series of thoughtless arm maneuvers. She had absorbed that distinctly American set of female values—her primary life goal was to marry a rich man. Poppy felt vaguely threatened by the appearance of Kristy Anne’s breasts unbound in the room. Poppy worked with something non-physical; she could not remove a bra to charm people. A single ice cube melted in her cocktail glass, a red melt rapidly dissolving. Bitter wound. Her chest sings.

“Happy birthday to you,” the table sang. They were celebrating K.A.’s birthday that night, “May all your dreams come true.”

Outside the restaurant, Kristy Anne put her lips to Poppy’s ear to whisper:

“It’s not my birthday.”

She had so thoroughly reinvented herself she’d rearranged the calendar and month of her birth to situate her birthstone as the sapphire, which better complimented her complexion. Poppy did not believe in celebrating birthdays. She had been born twice, age zero and age seven.

“What language are they speaking at that table?” Ned asked Ryo.

“The Nordic region, I’m thinking. I give them the same, I receive them the same.”

Drunk, he quoted misshapen lines of Whitman.

“I don’t think so,” Ned smiled. *What a dumbass*. Poppy stood up and approached the table of tourists, resting her hand on the back of their chair and presenting them with a self-satisfied smile, she spoke secretively to them, returning with a treasure.

“You’ll never guess,” she said, fully expecting to be the hero lavished with praise for her initiative. But the brothers ignored her. She had misunderstood the game. She was right.

They would never guess.

Poppy drank too much, too fast (a bottle of white then red, wine, wine, wine, flute of prosecco with tangerine juice and pomegranate seeds), because if she was going to sleep with Ryo tonight while holding Ned obsessively in her head she’d need to be dumb drunk. She did it. She was ready, sufficiently non-present. Poppy felt stable power over Ryo. The eventual loss of respect she felt for people once they became reachable had destroyed all her relationships thus far. She put his hands on her ass. This was how she tried to make herself respect him again.

“Stop. I’m going to vomit.” He removed his hands from her ass.

As she threw up into the toilet and over the edge of the toilet, Ryo held her hair away from her face gently in the shelter of his hands.

“Go,” she said, “I’m disgusting.” He stayed and rested his hand between her shoulders.

“It’s okay, let it out.” He did nothing but hold her all night. Poppy woke to moonlight and there, caught in Ryo’s arms, she dreamed of his brother. *Dear repressed Ned*. She thought of removing herself from Ryo’s arms, igniting the blue light of her phone: SIRI. TEXT NED.

She wanted to confess.

She turned to her side and slept.

In the morning, Ryo’s neck smelled of vomit from where Poppy’s face had lain in the night. There is broken glass on the street outside Poppy’s apartment. A car crash. *Someone*

was hurt here. Its blue sparkling pile reflects pink cherry blossoms like some mirror to the sky.

She had been depressed not because of a lack of joy in her life but because the thought of her not mattering to Ned had been overwhelming her entire body. The possibility that he might be a part of her life returned her to herself. When acquaintances praised him in her company she felt pride and wanted to take ownership of him, wanted to say how he somehow belonged to her, because she understood that he was hers even though he didn't listen and was immature despite being older, this was her lot, someone had given her this media naranja and she would not want him to change, she would just want him to exist alongside her so she could admire him. She loved him. She had been going out and having conversations with men but each night she returned home (*no one is you*) to realize how much she loved him. His dark eyes. Constantly talking to people, she was contained by none of them. Sieves, love was sieves. So fundamentally futile at containing people. She was horrified to find she could forgive the awful things he did if he'd only love her back. Her phone chimes repeatedly, someone has texted her multiple times, and, she hopes from the other room that it is Ned telling her everything she wishes she could confess to him, telling her oh beauty that she can survive — that love heals all wounds.

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To people in their vicinity, Ned and Poppy sounded like two competing contestants on a quiz show, rapid firing questions at one another, asking one another to account for their lives.

When she played she was all of her bets all the way in.

“We weren't bad. We were creative as kids.”

“Sweetness doesn't come naturally to me.”

“You don’t know how to love people,” Ned suggested.

“You coddle your loneliness,” Poppy prescribed.

“Guilty,” Ned replied. Poppy was experimenting to see if it was possible to form a relationship not on lies but on omissions, absences, holes. How could she tell Ned? What could she say—*I’ve structured my life around a series of destructive affairs?* How could he understand what she herself failed to comprehend about her life and decisions? How did one explain shame to someone for whom shame had never figured in their life? There was no language in which she could explain her wounds to him. Still, when her eyes spoke to him, his eyes spoke back. *Understood*. Blue arrow tattooed on Ned’s wrist.

“Where does it point to?” Poppy said.

“You mean—who does it pierce? *I would like to fuck you*. Poppy had a load of baggage standing next to her. She refused to acknowledge it even as it bore her monogram. *Her initials*. It clearly belonged to her. *Take ownership*, one wanted to say. She couldn’t. If she had, under its weight she would’ve been unable to journey onward. When Ned asked her about the two burn marks on her hand, Poppy refused to explain. Because Ned was ten years older than Poppy, she was playing at being an adult with him. Part of this play involved not sleeping with Ned for the first six months they dated. She wanted to stay over and sleep in his bed, but he made it clear that if she stayed in his bed there were certain expectations for their time together there.

“I like to be in control of situations,” Ned said.

“As do I.” *The surest way to gain control is by ceding control*.

They street parked outside downtown to go to an indoor-outdoor bar. A homeless man approached the car and asked Ned for cash. Ned supplied the man with cash and the

man prompted Poppy to “give him what he wants, make him happy, know what I’m saying? Show him a good time.”

There was the funny dance of navigating rain puddles while holding hands.

Poppy was underdressed for the restaurant where women with dyed hair pranced about in bell-sleeved dresses and false eye lashes. She was somehow failing at being a woman. A gaggle of bridesmaids flew into the place wearing hot pink tanks with the word BITCHES encrusted in rhinestones across the front. One of them keyed repeatedly into her conversation with Ned.

Kristy Anne walked into the restaurant with a man in white jeans. The backs of her shoes were blood red. A slit in her black top revealed an intricate bra. Her hair had been dyed jet black; she wore it cropped around her face. Her date wore a black velvet embroidered jacket. He had strategically placed gel in his hair to accentuate stray bits around his face.

Poppy ducked her head down. Repeat of her childhood habit.

Food mashed into her forehead. She remembered Ned before her.

She picked her head up.

Orange risotto stuck to her forehead.

“What was that?” Ned said.

Somber, she frowned in delight.

“Dope dinner.”

“Let’s refrain from calling dinner dope, shall we?”

“Yes, sir,” Poppy said. *Descend from your high horse most snobbish knight.* She loved that he bossed her around, paternalistic tone notwithstanding. She often goaded him.

“I’m pleased we’re in agreement.” *Internal eye roll.*

Ned was a gatherer. He gathered his friends for Friday family meals. Poppy dressed in a mystic flowing dress that tied like a robe. Ned liked to take Poppy out to bars and watch her flirt with other women using rambunctious philosophical commentaries. Ned sat them down at tables of strangers and Poppy, unthreatened by his gesture, sought to charm them and ignored Ned, until convinced of her value he conceded to wrapping his arm around her waist, and reclaiming her, as if the whole evening had been a performance staged beforehand by him.

She knew her role, but it was tiresome to be made to prove her worth like a piece of gold repeatedly bitten into to test its veracity. This routine provoked anxiety in her before seeing him most nights—what if she couldn't muster a winning performance? What if her charm was wearing thin? She understood her value had to be continuously reasserted before Ned's eyes or he would lose interest. It was a mental stamina in relation to her charisma that interested him in her. It was a dread to be assigned value based on an asset she felt she could not fully control.

Poppy needed Ned now. He'd captured some image of her of which she could not let go. She could not see/possess the image, but she understood from his dealings with her that it was an image worthy of preservation—the consecration of his love which haloed her normal, plain face. She had not sought images from others before. That she simultaneously resented him for being the benefactor of this image and wanted to disarm him made her words toward him awkwardly turned inward like spoons, smooth dented surfaces. Poppy was true but sometimes she considered making love to these women she charmed for Ned's pleasure, women who wore fuchsia lipstick and ordered "something strong" at bars. These women she

saw running around the park or lifting their legs before mirrors atop tables in small, swish Pilates studios sweating it out indoors on summer afternoons.

Ned cooked homemade miso soup with squash for her with large fragrant shrimp. He cooked with chopsticks and the window open. He flipped his chopsticks upside down to give her a shrimp that evaded her capture. He poured sake into her glass. He grew small vegetables in glasses beside his bedroom window. They were delicate, tender. Unbearably breakable. There was a moment when she woke up and disliking all the objects around her realized she was living not her life but Ned's life. Their apartment was filled with his belongings. She had created a vacuum then filled this hole in with Ned's wants and preferences, his liking for function over beauty, whereas she wanted nonfunctional items that sat prettily waiting to be rearranged daily. She opened the blinds and let the sound of water from the fountain wash over her hot face. Ned was travelling, now in Kyoto, next Medina and Mallorca, at a hotel with English words scrawled on the mirrors and walls. He video chatted with Poppy, showing her the bath tub that occupied the center of the room. A red rotary phone sat atop his nightstand and the floor of poured concrete bore a quote about dreams.

"Get a load of this image," Ned said, turning his iPhone toward the shower door. A circular image of a woman's face pasted into what appeared to be a submarine door captured a woman appearing to escape from the shower. Trapped, she could not get out, a coy gesture toward hipster irony. "I thought you would be impressed," Ned said.

It was as if someone had dunked her face in the burning sun.

Poppy drives too fast down the alley. It's dark. No one can see. The moon shines.

Luminous your face in the sky like the moon it was taking over everything even in the day it

clung to my mind haunting, moonlike, tender, far away, something one bays at but does not reach. Imagine touching the moon. She would not dare.

“Slow down,” Ned says.

She pulls over to the side. A firetruck, lights flashing red and white in the dark night, drives by them, luminous siren flickering on the exteriors of houses. *Set me aflame siren light.*

“How beautiful.”

“That something is burning?” (Bear with me, we are skimming the surface of glittering, reflective, gleaming things!)

Athena sent sporadic emails with updates about how she wanted to be buried after death to Poppy, always preceded by insistences that she wasn't ill or suicidal, which was actually the case, only, she wanted to constantly revise her passage to the other realm. She was writing a kind of living will and testament, one that consisted of pages describing imagined funeral ceremonies.

“Burn me,” she writes, “Then scatter me at sea.”

“I'm in love,” Poppy told Athena over the phone.

“Does he compliment you when you get dressed up?” Athena said.

“Never.”

“Train him.”

“Know that what happened between us won't come back to bite you in the ass,” Ryo said beside a fire in his courtyard. Ned had gone inside to bring out a tender octopus carpaccio he was preparing, slicing razor thin for a light lunch. He had been indoors for some time consumed by the delicate task of separating layers of octopus flesh and the layering of

liquids: lime juice, olive oil, coarse salt. Conversation falling by the wayside, Poppy reached to refill her wine glass.

“Hey-o take it easy. You’re a hurler.” Ryo was slathering sunscreen over his face.

“Jesus. Low blow even for you Ryo.” Poppy’s face burned.

“Help yourself, sweetheart.” He meant the opposite of sweetheart—which never denotes sweetness when used in tandem with heart to run over a human as a vehicle of belittlement. In their time away from knowing one another intimately Ryo had been pondering the conundrum of Poppy in an attempt to understand why she had left him and sooth his fears by searching for clues in her variable behavior. To avoid any self-examination, he had undertaken an exhaustive study of his memories of Poppy and had formed multiple not too charitable opinions of her, which he snidely imparted via joshing references to her continuously bad behavior: “Do you still not keep food in your fridge now that you’re shackled up with Ned?” he asked before regaling her with a story of a cousin who’d been hospitalized for anorexia.

He had a self-protective faith in the consistency of her wrongdoing. However, no one is purely unequivocal in their pursuit of vice. Poppy enjoyed butterflies and the delicacy of winged things. She felt love. Just the other week she’d been asked to contribute to a workplace discussion on succeeding at social soirees. Life is painfully ironic. Do I look like a person thriving? *I am a person floundering under the pressures of a too strange system. People stab me and I don’t say: stop that hurts. Do you not know how to comport yourself with compassion and humanity?* (Here, again, we must turn the pillowcase inside out to understand more: Ryo had been wounded by Poppy. His minor abrasions were nothing compared to the ruthless way she had exchanged him for his brother. We could keep flipping

the pillowcase inside out and we'd never come to any understanding on which we could rest our heads and sleep soundly).

“Splendid.” That was how one placated a boss or a husband.

Unnerved in Ryo's vicinity, once having known no physical boundaries with him in the way of lovers, Poppy found herself commencing to move near and fall away from Ryo's legs.

She watches him speak.

My god. The memory of your mouth.

Poppy remembers Ryo bore a lotus tattoo on his left shoulder and on lazy mornings he stretched a headband on before heading out to play Sunday morning soccer. She smells the grass that clung wetly to his legs. Mourning the smell of his t-shirts, their crumpled cotton. His tossed clothes in the house. Mud ran down her window. Sardines from a can. Ryo was a doctor. She remembers even now his grocery store conveyor belt, well balanced, his blue scrubs. He had determined the perfect quantity for all things. Doctors and first responders and people whose job it was to save lives—they understood something about survival, that when you look into someone else's face politics don't impinge on salvation. She remembers seeing Ryo with his new girlfriend walking in the rain. He held the umbrella. She was Vietnamese, too. Poppy remembers thinking something petty about language and kissing tongues. During their time together they had had multiple conversations about the machismo of their respective parents' cultures.

“I'll be heading to Amsterdam next week.” There was so much unspoken that had nevertheless been intuited or otherwise communicated that it felt impossible to move forward. Perhaps love and longing still existed between them mixed with remorse and

sorrow. What loomed larger? She wanted Ryo to love her and wanted him to release her from their intimacy. Ryo avoided looking explicitly at Poppy's face out of fear of being overcome with yearning.

Ryo's moving out had occurred over a series of excursions on a borrowed blue truck. The doormats—gone. The neat retro car-style seat—also gone. Dividing up books had been harder—they shared books. Who got to keep the classics? The tomes with their lovenotes annotated in the margins? We love someone best when we cannot take their pulse—when we cannot sufficiently pin them down to any one, single image. She read, she acted foolishly. Who was she? Who had thrown him away? She had called Athena soon after from alone in her now couchless living room. The brightness of Athena's spirit filled Poppy with joy: “What you need is munchkin love. I'll send you photos of the first day of school.” Poppy stole Ryo's favorite Yankees cap in childish retribution for his brutal, warranted, well-aimed pokings, lifting it from the table by the porch and depositing it in her canvas bag. Ned chided Poppy when he saw her wearing the hat the following morning over porridge, ponytail astray, “Where'd you get that?”

He knew. He knew of course, of course he knew—because, alas, spoilsport he noticed the endearing stain above the left ear, a smear of paint that had hardened and now gave the cap unexpected color. Ned phoned Ryo and opened with the line—

“Guess who lifted your beloved Yankees cap,” then launched into a conversation on the game. Poppy felt shut out. She wanted to be closest to Ned but there would always be some way in which she was separate from him. She could not converse on the game.

There was a sibling kindredness, beginning with childhood splinters in bare feet and burning scrapes on hands from climbing trees, which Poppy's will to seduce could not

pervade. There had been one conversation between the brothers about the exchange of Poppy.

“What was the sex like?”

“She likes to be hurt, man. Why she’s into you.” (Ryo kept a nude photograph of Poppy in his nightstand drawer beside a protein bar, company lighter, stack of business cards).

“None of that starfishing and faking you get from Chiara,” said Ned.

“Chiara and I broke up.”

“I could relate to Chiara in spiritual ways.”

“Spiritual? I wear five bracelets every day, including a jade one,” Ryo said.

“Dammit now my ears are cold from my haircut,” Ned replied

“Get some ear muffs,” Ryo said.

“No, then you look like a douchebag. I can’t wear earmuffs when it’s sixty-five degrees.”

“I could write a kickass book about my life,” Ryo said. “Would you proof it?”

“Don’t be comical,” Ned replied.

“Honestly? I would prefer someone five years younger and smoking hot,” Ryo said.

“Bachelor party in Cuba or Colombia?” Ned said.

“Colombia obviously. Hotter strippers,”

“The neighbors are smoking weed.”

“You going to the gala Saturday?”

“Does anyone expect me to be there?”

Ryo pulled his shoes back on. He meant to leave.

“No.”

“Then no.”

It takes light to capture an image.

7 *Three Years Later*

Blue light. *Your lips*. The floor in Ned’s condo around her ankles where the straps of her heels wrapped around her feet felt cold. The air (cold) radiated. Her black skirt tied around her waist. She wore a blue sweater with sparkled stars on it. His bedroom, painted navy, looked velvet with a series of genie-like lamps sat on a bureau. From his terrace, the chimneys butted into sky. Him: hyperkinetic about the importance of a good wine pairing. Her: “You’re being a bore.” He looked and spoke like someone she had known, like David, she thought. Because Ned loved her, he did not stay mad at her over her egregious commentary. He did not chastise her. What patience and emotional wherewithal. He was unwilling to confront the powerful delusions that allowed him to love Poppy.

The outlets were askew. The scrape on the floor, like a skinned knee. The secret was they were both pretending. Pretending to belong in Paris, pretending at everything. To know wine. Ned comes in from a run around Parc de Bagatelle. Blue bandaids crisscross his legs scraped from rose thorns. Sitting on the floor beneath the window, Poppy felt Ned’s fingers in her hair.

“Speak to me, Poppy” he said. The change of linguistic texture brought her back.

“Why did you choose this life?” Poppy said.

“I chose it because I could walk on the streets,” Ned said. He filled a glass with crushed ice. Poppy bent her arm yogically and said: “Do you want to be a destination in this

geographical space?” Breathe. “There are other topographies, other geographies. There are maps.”

Jubilant, her phrases hung suspended like teeth.

Her Cheshire smile.

Poppy was pregnant. Ned and Poppy had made arrangements to tie the knot in Sicily.

“Do you want to get married?” Ned had said.

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Let’s do it.”

This was how life occurred, falling into futures like selecting snacks at the market.

8 *One Year Later*

Returned to Paris from vacation in Rancho Mirage, California, Poppy sets two éclairs on a dish. Hard glazes. Poppy fails to relate to her mommy friends because they are boring inconsequential humans who discuss diaper rash creams and wear chewable mom jewelry for their babies to teeth on as they carry on banal conversations: “We made little quails. We seared them,” the woman said. *For Heaven’s sake*. Poppy and the lady walk white labs and baby carriages. Roadkill. There’s always blood with purity. Crickets sing from beneath the Métro. Abigail, Poppy’s most frequent mommy friends bit into an éclair. Poppy realized she didn’t like Abi, though she loved her. Where Abi was playful, Poppy was inclined to take things too seriously, to attempt to distill moments into fraught exchanges and capture people’s attentions and funnel them into a bottle like someone collecting droplets of rainwater for a drought. Everything felt important to Poppy in ways small things weren’t important to Abigail. Poppy studiously avoided the daily expression of destruction in small

slights, and in doing so she stored excesses of destructive energy. It was Poppy's intensity which led some to become enamored with her and others to find her grating.

The women competed to see who could be the sweetest toward their respective baby: "Who's Mommy's Little Angel?" lost to "Can we slow down? Eloise is sensitive to road bumps." (Poppy cannot feel the things they feel. She lives in extremes. What is gentle?)

Poppy was always going through backdoors in life. Now, mother of a child, she had no backdoor or escape hatch. Poppy sits with her stroller beneath an umbrella of trees in the Luxembourg Gardens. Silver brunia and dusty miller grew about the flowers. The stone cold on her back in the pocket between shoulder blades. The pale birches like candies before a tin building. The artful screaming of the bus brakes (*do you hear the airplane?*) huge crane (building not birds) straight branches knocking against one another (competing for sky). Shadow. Sun on her legs. Cloudless, the sky so blue it's purple. The wind stroking her forehead (such cool fingers). She pushes the baby in her bonnet like some mobile flower. A bee's legs whisker delicately on her forearm. If you are gentle to the world, it will be gentle to you back.

Poppy had developed her own secret language with her child who did not respond. "Light or dark, light or dark?" Poppy said to Lily, shielding the baby's eyes from sun. Poppy's days spent with the nonverbal child. She verbalized this togetherness, which was a form loneliness.

Meanwhile, Camilla (her Snapchat cousin), was travelling across South America: Valparaíso Chile; Viña del Mar, Chile; Valle de Luna, Chile; Machu Pichu, Peru; Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia...Finally, after a six-month tour of the southern hemisphere, Camilla came to stay

with Poppy in Paris, France for a spell along her travels. She was too tired from world-travelling to be sullen. Some days she was cranky and distancing. Other days she was pulling people in, drawing them close with hyper-charismatic charm. Besos on their cheeks, brows, hands.

Camilla set up shop in the guest room, which was the little blue room adjoining the baby's room. She spilled love over the baby in a distinctly Mexican way. Poppy volleyed between catty connection and cursory indifference in her demeanor. Camilla used hashtags unironically #Livingthedream #Singleladiesforlife #Livingitup #Gr8tfulforJesus #Lategram.

Camilla greeted Poppy in their family way, commenting on her physique.

“Querida are you bigger or am I más chiquita? O sea?” She apologized for looking tan facha though she looked gorgeous, drinkable perfection, and she knew it, but her false show of modesty endeared her to Poppy indicating she could look ever more glorious for the requisite audience of male admirers.

“You're smaller, flaca,” Poppy said though she *was* bigger. She had had a baby.

Camilla called Poppy *amor, mi vida*. Bratty and splendid in her love. Camilla's love flowered horizontally, a natural Mexican affection Poppy admired and wanted to bestow on others. Like some ever, always gift: the love of fluid, fluent words. Camilla makes animal sounds on Poppy's baby's, Lily's, stomach. More than Camilla's material wealth, it was this—her true wealth—which Poppy admired: the love of a Mexican family that absolves one's flubs and slips. Meanwhile, Poppy asked Ned to push her harshly against hard objects when they made love. She would have stopped loving him if he did not have it in him to continually hurt her.

Camilla had recently left her husband for the second time—they'd divorced and remarried once already. After the first separation, Camilla had gotten a breast reduction to displease her husband. It was like her husband had cracked her and expecting a slippery sloppy egg to plop out Camilla flew out fully formed, a bird. Her wings. She flies. He won her back with summer houses and diamond earrings—they're so hard they're impenetrable. Like glass, Camilla's diamonds reflect light, but she can't break them. She tries when she throws the set against the door soon after discovering the mistress Jorge had brought from Panama and set up with a job and love pad nearby one of his seventeen casinos. She left him "for good" this time.

"I found myself lying to everyone to cover for him. I realized, I don't even love him."

Camilla shot par on a golf course and her husband had always introduced her with this tidbit—his greatest pride out of all her accomplishments (she was also a celebrated employee at Snapchat). She was attractive, certainly.

"What bothers me is the emotional attachment. I would've been fine if he'd just had one night stands," she confided to Poppy. "I don't know of a married couple in an open relationship for whom it's worked out long term." Poppy had never had a conversation with her cousins that didn't involve sex, love, men. Financially secure and devoid of ambitions, her cousins shaped their lives around the rockets and craters of female sexual allure. (Inside this pillowcase we see that Camilla was devastated by the death of her father, a wound that leaves her feeling sore.)

"Interesting," Poppy said.

"Pues, if you lose your values, who are you?" She flicked a piece of lint from her white flowy pants, the bell sleeve of her silkenblue kimono top grazing her long hair, held

back by a barrette. Her fingers shook. She had to reach twice for the fleck of lint to remove it. It was the smallest of vulnerabilities but there it was and Poppy recognized Camilla as a body suffering.

Camilla picked up a baby onesie with a pistol, smoking, on it, “Que cool!” At that instant in time as Camilla was snapping a pic of the onesie, her husband was Instagramming a photo of himself with half his mustache shaved off hashtag dada, hashtag DTLA. He could not return to Mexico for the time being, as his name had appeared in the Paradise Papers. That he had been funneling money into offshore shell companies to evade taxes in Mexico did not surprise Camilla. Only, she alone now moved freely from LA to Mexico, while her husband could return to all faces of the planet except for his country of origin. The repercussions for his return were not entirely clear, and it was yet to be determined which officials needed bribing to ensure his safe passage. Camilla was headed to their self-sustaining summer home in Tulum. The house had a name and a promotional video that allowed it to rent for 5,000 US dollars per night during high season. Paris Hilton stayed with her crew as did a prominent Mexican politician who needed to tuck away his mistress for a month.

Poppy tried to reassure her cousin by reminding her of what Camilla’s cook and confidante had said. “Consuelo says that your husband—”

“It doesn’t matter what Consuelo says. She’s an employee.” Something in Camilla’s eyes made Poppy feel like the woman might eat her. “Luisa bought a flat in Madrid.” Camilla said. Though Poppy’s cousins had not been spoilt as children, Camilla had been spoilt by marriage. There is never an age when a human outgrows the capacity to turn self-centered and demanding.

“Don’t you think there’s like a cultural difference between Mexican and American gente who have money?” Poppy asked, “Like wealthy Mexicans are so much freer.”

“No seas ridícula,” Camilla said. “U.S. liberals are rife with money. Lo juro.”

“How’d you get to be so wise?”

“You’re different. What happened to you? You used to be linda.” Camilla said.

“Life makes you madura.”

“It’s one thing to be madura, another to be dura.”

9 *Two Years Later, New Hampshire*

At two Lily has not yet potty-trained. “Unacceptable,” Athena exclaimed. Poppy has brought Lily to New Hampshire for Athena to encourage. Athena has promised results. “It’s about discipline, Poptart. Discipline and regularity. You have to do the same thing at the same hour every day.” Athena was the kind of mother who was at her best when there was a crisis or situation in need of management, because then she flew into action, proving her ability to prioritize and put out fires wherever they appeared. Without pressing needs foisted upon her by her offspring and workmates she turned taciturn and bit her nails while she shopped at Target for transparent storage bins and label makers. The security of Athena’s life made her yearn for indispensability. She was often assigned to plan benefits and trainings for her fellow musicians to funnel her radiant nurturing energy into a project that might contain her attention; Athena’s insistent support could be wearying. Poppy, in contrast, felt that support was sometimes silent. Athena banged her palm against the marble counter. “You have to put down boundaries.”

Bored by boundaries, Poppy embarks on a project to photograph Leander at work sculpting glass. He worked in a barn that resembled a child's construction out of dark logs.

Szerene has Athena's beauty and her first crush. She cannot speak to the boy.

"Daddy. What is love?" Sezy said, tapping her palm rhythmically on Leander's shoulder as if seeking to comfort her father or mimic his heartbeat. Sezy dreamed and wiggled in class. She was like a ladybug tangled in the loop of a rug, undeniably pretty, however, clumsy.

Leander drove, Athena sat in the passenger seat. Poppy sat in the back between Sezy and her own daughter Lily. She held Lily's foot in her right hand, her left passed Sezy a snack.

"Celebration of another human. Forgiveness of their sins." He lifts up his blue eyes to the rearview mirror and finds Poppy's face looking back and it feels to him as if every moment in his life has been leading him to that moment when their eyes kiss, oh forbidden love, in the glass.

He is driving, he looks away.

"You mean like you and Mommy?"

Athena collects Leander's non-driving hand.

"That's right." As children Poppy and Athena had been inseparable from age five. The girls were a domino one year apart of 5 dots | 6: able to be counted separately, they could not be pulled apart. Moving one sister moved them both. They were set down and played as one piece.

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When you want someone you can't have, longing turns into a swirl of spiteful desire, you want to destroy them, but if at any moment they came asking for you, you would pivot and accept them into your arms. The fury of feeling like someone should belong beside you was distinct from the wholesale rejection of a person due to incompatibility. When summarily done away with one could recover for they understood themselves to be vibrating on a different frequency. Rejection wounds differently when one is rejected by someone who loves them. Shutting off her camera in New Hampshire before Athena's bedroom door, Poppy says: "Tell me how you feel about me."

"There is no going back," Leander says. Here is his opportunity to deny her.

"Every other path would have led us here." There is no hesitation, no thinking. The heart takes action. Leander removes his wedding band. He puts his left hand to Poppy's cheek. Her cheek, warm, his hands, cold, burn like ice applied to calm a wound. Poppy has always been moving forward. An image flashes her back. She is in the house with the man with blue eyes.

Shattered windows, broken glass. *This is not her first affair.* She picks the glass up off the floor. She is seven, her hand bleeds. She has struck a trowel through the bedroom window.

Leander kisses her forehead.

When they find the child aged seven with a shard of glass clutched in her hand she will not let go. *Open your hand.*

In this game the sisters are set down and played as one piece. Poppy's move moves them both.

She looks up and freezes. Her hair opens around her now, revealing the contents of her face like a tattered, treasured book.

“I love you. I have always loved you,” Leander says.

She opens her hand.

10

The woman’s skirt pooled on the floor. Her mind puddled. Poppy wore black cherry hair, crinkled back, barrette taming her wildness. She was collecting herself, gathering feelings but teeming with wildness, always.

“Take it out of your mouth,” the man said. “Crouch down. Lower.”

This was his voice. Her Thighs.

During Sex.

Thoughts flutter like doves in her mind, burning shoulders. Hair down. Not sure how to move her feet around. Feeling swerved, engaged, enamored. Communication becomes fraught, weighted.

“I’m pulling you under,” he says. “Look,” on the verge of tears. Something as simple as. Something as pressing as. Her ear pressed to the floor.

After sex, Leander turns his whole body away from her and shelters his face with his forearm. She knows how to read this signal. It means something. Physical manifestation of self-protection. When he sits near her, he pulls his arm around his head, puts his jacket on, because he’s sheltering himself physically from her. Leander doesn’t want to be seen by her outside of bed, and she recognizes this from her own intense anxieties about being seen, truly seen, by someone. She relates to his bizarre way of being in the world, his clumsy hands and

exuberance, even as she feels she's met and never met him before. She imagines him in seventh grade where, surely, he was the boy capturing lizards and suffering under his own intense anxieties and shame over his home, ever in love with the musical voice of his principal out in the hallway. There are only so many ways to sabotage one's life, she thinks, but it takes just one way, repeated.

"I wonder about your freckles. How is it they happen to look like a barn?" Poppy asked.

"What freckles?"

"The ones on your back?"

"Do you know what I dream when you are away from me?"

"I am never away from you."

"Habit. When you're not physically proximate."

"I'm joking. I'm away from you most of the time."

"Don't be afraid of intensity."

"I'm not," Poppy said.

"Then tell me what happened to you when you were a child."

"What're you talking about?"

"Athena told me there was something weird."

Poppy fills a glass of wine with clear water and plunks in three ice cubes. The bottoms of her feet have floor stuck to them, and Leander takes his hand and wipes the particles, like confetti, from her skin.

He kisses her foot soles.

It tickles her: his lips on her foot, and she kicks the wine glass over. It shatters on the floor.

Leander and Athena's children sat with brightly colored socks and clean shoes like children who own many, many pairs of shoes. The girls' hair was pulled cleanly back and they both played games on an iPhone. Multiple cold beverages sweated between them. Szerene and Azalea. The kids. Azalea's shoulder had nudged a Halloween pumpkin, now cracked open on the floor. Black cat statues turned their faces; paper bats shadowed up the wall. The scent of firewood burning greeted Poppy as she entered her sister's home. Leander entered bearing a stack of wood for burning.

The black braid between Athena's shoulder blades released a puff of shampoo. The bubbly scent of laundry sugared out onto the patio. There was a photo of their daughter on a bike with a helmet on, chin pinched, black hair bobbed. This was Leander's favorite daughter, Azalea. Azalea held a sippy cup with cheerios in one hand, an iPhone with talking ladybugs in the other. She had her mother's sharp bangs.

"Quit with your shenanigans!" Athena called when Szerene kicked Azalea purposefully under the table. One of the daughters' bangs, the blonder girl's, had been cropped too short. She reached for the ends. The children did not understand the aesthetic pressure they endured.

"It's okay you can kick me if you like," Poppy said.

Leander was laying out leaves on Athena's back. "Holy Guacamole, these two. Get a load of the peanut gallery," she laughed. Poppy could not look directly at anyone, sunglasses protected her eyes. She felt like melting. Maybe she was melting.

I lick your skin; it tastes like hell. You taste like hell to me. Burning.

The man, Leander, is her brother-in-law. They have been sleeping together since Poppy was twenty-two and Leander was thirty. When Leander was twelve his mother shot

herself in the head with a hunting rifle. Three years later his father remarried a lady in a navy suit. “If your mom is gone darling, is it really so bad to recommit?” The father was a smalltime actor who wore Hawaiian shirts and laughed ebulliently from his sunburned chest. What was it about Poppy and Leander that they both craved a sharp edge? She could not sit still. She must move.

“Be still,” he said.

“I love it when you tell me what to do.”

Now, Athena was pregnant again for the third time with another daughter; Leander and Poppy’s love interludes could not go on. Poppy loved Leander’s wife and children. It was like: inside other people’s furnished, full lives she was a ghost life, invisible but felt presence. She wondered if Leander compared her body to Athena’s. In his head. How she ranked in a side by side. Or if they were like red wine and white wine: each one better paired with certain moods, one healthier, the other sparklier. *Behold. Swirl me.*

“Come on Lily,” Poppy said getting up from the lounging, “Mommy will tuck you in for nap time like two commas tucking a modifier into a prepositional phrase.”

“You are the only person who sees me. Who gets what I need.” Leander was obsessed with, fixated on, Poppy’s photographs of edges. They fascinated him so that she wondered where were his edges or where did he imagine her edges to be? Even when she is away from Leander she wonders about him at night. When her mind grows silent, he appears, loud. As if he’s always there waiting for stillness to emerge in her. She misses him, his wrists.

“Your hands look like Athena’s.”

“That is strange to say.”

“This is a strange thing we do.” The firmness of his convictions made Leander the ultimate rupture of them all. He genuinely loved Athena (who wouldn’t?), but there was some meaning about his and Poppy’s lives, his which had been plotted and tame, Poppy’s which had been unbound and borderline insane, which they could only explore by entering into an intimate relationship. They went for many years back and forth, at holiday parties, him expressing too much interest in her photographs, and Poppy able to remember every moment with him, heightened. She remembers the first time she met Leander. He wore a blue tie. She remembers him playfully shushing her on her wedding day when she gushed over his glass sculpture. From these frames, she constructs a dangerous photo album. They had planned to meet once when Leander was in Paris for an art fair. Both had known what would happen but, instead, Poppy had no-shown, left him stranded, standing in the middle of the city of love.

“What’s the first thing you do when you tear down a house?”

“You bring in the wrecking ball.”

“Then what?”

“Protect the trees.”

“And next?”

“You burn it down.” (We don’t know with certainty who said what in this exchange.

Was this Leander or Poppy? Suffice it to say they shared an interest in the workings of destruction.)

“How do you *tear* down a house?”

“You don’t understand. There is no house.”

Mildred, the live-in nanny, occupied a room in the children's wing. At twenty-two she was unattractive enough to make her presence in the house unassuming, non-threatening to Athena who was away semiannually performing solo cello. Meanwhile, Leander kept his philandering outside the home but inside the family, which suited them all. The unassuming woman's jokiness and general plainness was reassuring in a household where both husband and wife held poorly disguised desires for new sensations and continually evolving evocations of the sublime. Living with the musician (Athena) and the famed glass artist (Leander) gave the woman social capital. Prettier girls turned their full attention on her as she spoke of the family trips with sham modesty. She'd gained authority among the nannies in the neighborhood, and her placidity in refusing to wield it with anything other than a doleful look made her grow in superiority. This was how she came to be the most popular person on most playgrounds. She set herself up for superiority by comparison.

Poppy grew tired of things when the novelty wore off. Poppy and Leander shifted to making love inside her sister's marriage bed.

Athena.

Poppy sees her black hair spilling over the porcelain of the master tub. There's a chip, as if the tub were a tooth. Poppy was engaged in a long form conversation with someone in which they communicated via subterranean methods.

"We don't know. Grant us reprieve," Poppy said.

"That's a false mode of understanding or analysis," Leander replied. The energy between Leander and Poppy was wild, careening all around them like a million sparkling Christmas tree lights flecking the walls. They were in her sister's marriage bed with a quilt and coverlet of peach colored roses. So many throw pillows you could throw them for miles.

Poppy went into Athena's closet and turned over her cashmeres sweaters, pressed jeans. She took a sweater and unbuttoned tens of tiny buttons. She wanted to steal Athena's belongings. Someone was knocking on the bedroom door. Poppy opened the door in fear it was Athena come home.

It is the person she loves and she cannot tell them.

Instead she shuts the door. Leander returned to his studio. There was something poetic about the tree shaped with bags of sand to lean the hot glass. Or the beautiful way he compressed and released space. Poppy stole a beautiful long-sleeved shirt but at the last minute repented, folded it back in its rightful place. She was rifling through Athena's life. And one day she did not want to put on her dirty underwear from the night before, so she stole Athena's panties. There were images she chose not to confront. What could she have seen?

She could have seen Leander and Athena later that night in that same bedroom. She could have seen that his affair with her, oddly, made him more inclined to adore Athena. Not because he felt passion for Athena in the same way he did Poppy, but because he was spilling with the dangerous elation of illicit love, which propels one to take greater and greater risks.

Mornings Mildred is up before the family. She attends morning mass. "Prayer is the recourse of the powerless," Athena says as soon as Mildred bolts the door. It has become unfashionable, unintelligent to openly declare religious affiliations. Athena carries on with her childhood Catholic traditions to instill good moral values in the little ones. She prays not religiously but *devoutly*, the same way she attends daily exercise classes, adheres to a weekly manicure and pedicure, and volunteers seasonally for school events. Mildred gets her hair

trimmed weekly. Nobody notices when it's freshly cut except for Athena. This tickles Mildred, both the small hairs on the back of her neck and Athena's noticing. Invisible, she knows more than her heavy, unmoving cheeks allow. She wears yellow turtlenecks and cream turtlenecks and she folds each of these in separate piles. More than the children, *Mildred loves Athena*. It is for her that she lives in the house seasonally, dressing out of suitcases as Athena tours in winter/fall.

Leander prefers to pet the children, like the ear scratches given to dogs who lick a returning owner's hand, when he walks in from work. Mildred devotes her life to realizing Athena's vision of home and life. She feels they are the only two who share this vision of the world, of how children should be dressed properly (French braids and bows, the bibs of pressed dresses monogrammed with initials, socks fringed in eyelet and lace). Children, young, yet decked out like relics from another age. *What kind of wastefulness is it to dress a toddler in white tights?*

And one day Mildred is making a pitcher of fresh orange juice. She peels the oranges first to set aside orange twirls for peel infused sugar. She nicks her finger. *Damn knife*. She goes upstairs for bandaids sucking her bloodied thumb (*from the sound of the feet it is impossible to tell if someone is coming up or going down the stairs*) stomping toward the master bathroom.

Slow sounds flit in the interiors. Knocking like churning butter.

It is the making of love. A sticky human quality to sex that Mildred dislikes sends her fleeing. *Leander's arms like cages trap me. I could not escape. Mildred's eyes penetrate me.*

There is some strong grace in being the protector of this secret. She cherishes it, the complete power to destroy a family, lives. She feels like the linchpin. Sometimes she worries,

dreams in the night she lets something slip to Athena by mistake. She loves Athena. [In a room with Poppy she feels pressured to tell, but they look in one another's eyes. She protects.] She loves all this family represents, their quilts folded in closets, and would not forsake them; she grants them cloister.

“Mildred would you get me a glass of water, please?” Poppy asks.

“Sure!”

Mildred returns with a glass full of ice. Poppy looks Mildred in the eye. “I’m sorry, there’s a chip in that glass. Do you want me to find you a different one? Or you can go help yourself.” Mildred thought Poppy grandiose, self-centered, in constant need of attention.

Seeing this passive aggressive exchange between Mildred and her sister, Athena thinks poor Milly must be envious of falling outside of their sisterly relationship, “It’s getting dark, Mildred, you should head out if you want to make the lecture,” she says.

“No, don’t go Mildred! Play catch a fish, play catch a fish!” The baby girls cried.

“Mildred, it’s time for you to go.” Athena, angelic Athena, envied silly Mildred who played a fool’s list of Broadway hits on repeat. For those who are envied by all, there is always that drab creature with shallow surface wounds (my mom never hugged me) whom they secretively envy.

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Even Mildred has her private life.

She sat now sipping hot tea, brewing schemes within her. This was the year moths were growing in Athena’s house. Athena would open the fridge, pull out a drawer to remove a spoon, and out flew the moths. Mildred lived in the artists’ house, where she broke bread every day. Over the kitchen table—the children’s cups and spoons and platters. The little

ladies made noise (an awful ruckus) in the morning what with their TV shows and sizzling eggs. “Mildred, take out the trash.” “Mildred, look at this article.” “Mildred, don’t forget,” Athena would say.

She swiftly forgot. There were errands to be running. There were seats at the table empty. The head of the table.

One daughter, Szerene was always forgetting her shoes, leaving her shoelaces untied. Mildred was often leaving spare change at the bottom of her bag. It fell out.

That morning Mildred was painting her nails pink inside the coffee shop. Long, slow strokes. She was benevolent, in her love and happening. She was sitting alone in a Western themed omelet & coffee house. She picked up her napkin. She picked up her fork, her spoon, she set down her napkin on the table. She blew on her fingernails. She felt afraid. She felt proud. It got weirder, her life with the artists, after discovering the husband’s affair. Shoe shine boys and Catholic school girls in pleated skirts passed by the window of the omelet house. There was nothing to do but wait. Eventually, Athena would find out what Poppy had done and she would know. At least one day, if not today.

Mildred got in an Uber. She hiccupped along as the car rode past train stations. She had requested that the driver take her via the train route to recreate the sensation of locomotion. She held in her backpack two cotton nightgowns, two pairs of buckle shoes, two slippers, and two dresses with buttons up the front and zippers down the back. She chewed gum pack to pack.

“We’re going to Vermont?” the driver said.

“Oh, yes,” Mildred replied, opening her purse for a chapstick to release a lithe black moth that fluttered out and bumped into her nose. “Oh, no,” she muttered.

“AC?” the driver replied, fretting over her mournful tone.

“We’ll freeze!” Mildred squeezed her upper arms in mock chill.

There was a dumpster with the word kindness spray-painted onto its side where Mildred unloaded from the Uber, slamming the door goodbye. She had spent hours in the Uber, driving from Massachusetts to Vermont. She had worked in the artist’s house for two years. Now she dropped her tuna sandwich from the convenience store into the overflowing dumpster. She knew her brother wasn’t expecting her, but she believed he loved her. She had his address written on the back of her left hand—childish. she knew, but this way it could not be separated from her along her journey. She’d asked the Uber driver to leave her seven houses away, so she could refresh herself and arrive at her brother’s house on foot. She knew he lived in a house with a modern pool, atop a hill. She knew this from her brother’s most recent Christmas card, which showed him and his three daughters and their golden retriever, Skedoodle, standing beside the pool—the horizon from atop the hill glowing holiday red in the burning sun. Mildred had decided, already, which of these daughters would be her favorite based on the sheepishness of the child’s pose in relation to the other sisters’ parading in flouncy dresses. Mildred stepped on gum that attached to her shoe. The sidewalk glittered in the sun. She was made aware of the existence of invisible sprinklers that rose from the ground and dispersed water droplets, misting the air. She tried to remove the gum wad from her shoe, but the grass would not cooperate.

Mildred’s neck was sweaty. She gathered and bound her blue hair atop her head. She smiled politely at the school children standing outside the Natural Science Museum, their green shirts identifying them as part of the same elementary school. She removed her cherry chapstick from her bag and twirled it in her hand. There was a complete inability for the

mother walking past Mildred to understand why she had blue hair as a grown up. Mildred was twenty-two.

Mildred did not see the mother. She was counting seven dew drops on a blade of winter grass. A seed pod detached from the tree. Her seed. Sometimes it felt like kismet. Mildred and fallen seeds. She grew flowers from seeds on Athena's lawn. The last time she had seen her brother they had been in the car, he was driving. She kept redirecting the air conditioning vents on her face, off her face, as her mood and intensity varied. Her coffee sloshed into his cup holder. He waved his hand in complaint, on the phone. He made multiple Bluetooth phone calls.

"This is the last time," he had said. And this had been his only comment about bailing her out from jail. At this moment, she was walking directly atop acorns, chewing them with shoe.

A child answered the door. Her face glowed blue from the shine of star-wand light. It was the sheepish child in the photo. The child wore blue sneakers. Her left lace dragged, untied. Blood from a scratched mosquito bite ran down the child's leg absorbing into her white sock.

"Come in," the child said, not bothering to verify identity or distinguish danger, lost in chewing the end of her carrot braid. "Mildred! What are you doing here?" adult voice said.

"I was in the area. Your address was on the Christmas card."

"We're on our way out the door for soccer. Say hello Kaulin. This is Daddy's sister."

Kaulin removed the braid from her mouth.

"Daddy. She's got blue hair."

Mildred laughed.

“Maybe we can visit later. What hotel are you staying at?” A duck in the backyard rubbed the back of its head against its tail, ruffled its feathers.

“Would it be okay if I hung out here till you got back?” Mildred said.

“I’d have to check with Elise.” He looked at his watch for answers.

“No worries. Just asking in case you needed a duck-sitter.” He did not respond to Mildred’s joke. Mildred watched as he bolted the door, buckled Kaulin into her car seat, and maneuvered out of the long driveway with a slowness that denoted excessive caution and care.

Mildred walked left down the street. At the stop sign she stopped. She looked both ways. She had nowhere to go. She considered going left, then right. Instead she turned around the way she had come. She plopped herself down on the grass outside her brother’s home, let him see me when he comes, she thought, laying back in the grass. She would fall asleep. *Let him come. He must accept me.* From the sky, Mildred thought she heard an airplane. She had nowhere to go. She closed her eyes. The taste of grass reminded her of growth, newness, forgiveness of past deeds. Mildred did not know, but, a pale moth landed on her knee. She went home—*caution, your destination does not exist*—to Leander and Athena’s home, the only home she knew.

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When Athena arrives home she realizes she has spent all of rehearsal that night staring at the trombonist’s calves, the woman’s purple skirt and green sweater calling attention to her jade hoop earrings. Outside her windshield, the sky is positively purple. At a dinner party last night, Athena slid her hand into Leander’s thinking *don’t embarrass me* as Leander discussed an abstract glass he hoped would earn praise. A moth greets Athena as she enters her home.

She scans the floor, scans the ceiling. Everywhere debris. No. It's the smattering of starlight. She turns to the kitchen sink and pulls out a ceramic watering jar. She waters the ferns above the sink. She does not need to undertake this task, she has a fleet of household staff who take care of these things, but, still, she needs to feel nurturing. The water runs down her wool sleeve. She knows it will freeze if she goes outside. She turns off the light in the kitchen and she hears it: laughter, a female human's laughter, coming from down the hall, the cracked door of her rehearsal room. She wonders about recordings of the news, would Leander be up watching replays of early morning MSNBC?, the sound of which could provoke in her the strongest of yearnings for coffee and half & half, her morning fat indulgence, before heading out to class with her trainer, a woman who holds her ankles as she does backward leg lifts in a studio mirrored with glass. As Athena makes her way down the hall she undoes her earrings and cradles them in her palm, slides off her wedding band and engagement ring. She never sleeps with her good jewelry. She clips off her weighty watch. And there it is again, *that laugh*, followed by a low groan like someone finds deeply lackluster the shade of her practice room chairs. She knows it cannot be Mildred, who has asked for the day off to travel. *Where? Only God knows. That woman has no friends.* As soon as she thinks it, Athena regrets her judgement. She begins a prayer. But she's pulled back to rehearsal. They had been sent home three hours early for not manifesting productive energy. Athena regrets not taking off her sweater sooner, she'd grown uncomfortably warm as the rehearsal wore on and she'd been unable to attack the piece to her liking. There is the sound of books dropping. *Don't wake the kids.* Athena was adamant about maintaining an ostentatious silence when the kids went to bed due to the difficulty of getting them to sleep—not even the queen would have been able to shatter the sanctimony of Athena's nighttime rituals which involved a series of

readings, singings, goadings, and harsh phrasings to entice her children to sleep. She would never admit that her children were spoilt. They deserved to be coddled in this way. Sleep was a terrifying journey into the unknown. Azalea, especially, feared that when she woke her house would be vacant, her surroundings gone. Would Athena tell Leander that night? She was pregnant for the third time. Surprise child. She felt irritated, her practice room belonged to her. She'd never declared it off limits, but she felt a sense of self-ness there that rightly kept others at bay, that radiated an invisible perimeter around her practice space. What made the room special was its complete emptiness except for two puce velvet chairs. One for Athena, the other for accompaniment. "LEANDER," she calls, loudly, breaking her ban on raised voices during the children's nighttime, more as a forewarning of her irritation than as an attempt to locate Leander in the house. The human music of laughter irradiating from the practice room halts. Athena reaches for the music room door but her hand is filled with her precious jewels, her diamonds, which remind her of Leander's glass with their startling reflective qualities. She cannot open the door without risking losing the shiny fragments she clasps. She will leave them on the porcelain tray beside her bathroom sink where she deposits them nightly. She passes rapidly, heels kissing stone.

The sound of Leander's voice from the stairwell greeting Athena home that night sends Poppy into tingles, *laying beneath you supine*. Poppy walks for hours in the freezing dark. She cannot bear to confront any source of light. Exhausted and frightened, she falls into bed without removing socks or brushing teeth. She wakes to find her cellphone dead on the floor.

Poppy wrote a million unsent emails in which she shared her truest feelings with Leander. Or in which she repented for their unspeakable sins. She sent one from her computer blue light. There exist three people for whom she would sacrifice everything: her daughter Lily, her sister, Athena, and her sister's husband, Leander. What if Poppy's life ended without her ever telling the person she loved she loved him? There were other planets in this orbit, of which Athena was the sun.

“What I mean to say is I love you sky, moon.”

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Oh, black stallion of my heart! Your staccato hooves like the rain outside my window. Patter of words, patter of finger pads on my shoulder. Your thumb in my mouth. I loved you most on rainy days, when, blue your eyes, you fell in water droplets from the sky. Bathing my face. I went out into the rain. I went out into the rain and stood among the stars. I am calling you, my prison. And if I were tadpoles, tadpoles in puddles, capture me in your glass jars. Take my hands, raise them to your face bathe them in your tears, I will lick your salt from my palms. I will eat your falling, you are ever loved when it is raining. When you see the rain, its spangled faces like falling stars, dazzling. Look at what it does in headlights. Know that I am loving you. Go and stand in the rain and be loved and when you taste, you must taste love. There is nothing prettier than gleam of wet pavement under streetlamps, and your face, pale like the moon, haloed with a glow from tiredness. Lift your face. Turn toward outer spaces. I spend days and days writing you love letters. They change each day but only slightly. They revolve, one day they are praising you, the next they are distancing you. Undecided. It rained for three days straight. When I make eye contact with you, the exposures are glaring. Anyone who turned their face toward our faces meeting would know:

she has licked his tears from his hands. There is no beauty without thundering. There is no pain without—the flowers around my dress are yellow and orange. I pour a glass of water and drink of you. Salt is in your body. Salt within a red, red wound. I imbibe you. I am making a place for your salt and suffering. Do not seek me. I am not worthy of the rain that it should streak my face with graceful patient strokes. I bow down in the rain.

It is the only way I know of loving you.

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Easter Sunday with the church people, monogrammed napkins, white petit fours, Champagne flutes of mimosas. Poppy filled her glass looking at Leander's reflection in the window and wondering what he was thinking about, how he must be laughing at people, at everyone.

“Where are the interesting people?” she said.

“You can't include everyone in your circles,” he said.

“I have decided everyone is an idiot, all of them.” Azalea came up to Poppy with a drawing of Poppy in a red dress, and Poppy understood the pressure of innocent life pressing on the borders of you. Poppy was making decisions, charting out her path, burning the brush on her way down without a thought for the small creatures. The further she went down her path the more troubled she grew. Bleeding edges. She'd lost her sense of certainty. She was freaking out. What Poppy had misplaced was the ability to get lost inside herself. To exist inside herself. Leander was everywhere to her now. In a room filled with people, she could turn suddenly sad and Leander would know, his energy would turn sad. They were in that kind of kinship.

Grass stretched out.

A child ran with a kite, his thin white line cast into the blue sky.

He's seven and already fishing for angels.

Oh my god, the sky. You are everywhere to me now.

Poppy held her red hat in her hand. Athena in a plaid shirt and non-functional riding boots pet the thin hair of her Azalea, as the child bit into delectable bite-sized pastries. Her mouth was so small, consuming the pastry involved multiple morditas. They lived on Longfellow Lane, gated off. Entrance required a punch code. When Athena walked the dog beyond the confines of the gated lane, she waited for the dog to greet people, sniffing them jovially. Athena walked the dog at seven AM and five PM, when the grass smelled like sunscreen and church bells rang like sky bells. Azalea untied the bouquet of cerulean and grape colored balloons, their curlicue ribbons escaped like the kinks from the pigtail of a curly haired little girl. The swiftness with which they flew up, wobbling into the sky, belied their eventual fall. Returned to the earth (without wings to support their drunken, rapid flight) they fell shrunken and shriveled into schoolyard bushes.

"I have to potty," Szerene screamed falling to her knees. Small sinner, she hated grass. Leander spoke loudly on the phone so multiple people could hear him. He wore a thin, striped scarf thrown over his shoulder and round blue glasses like *yes I'm rich and liberal*.

Leander had read her words aloud to her in bed. The love letters she has written him. She rolled her eyes. Why the performance? Was he trying to shame her? She felt separate from her love notes, anyhow. As though in emailing this evidence to him she had offered them to the universe. She envied him his confidence and ease, his basking in her love. Poppy had taken an enormous risk she had not taken before: she had left behind evidence.

“I want to touch the cactus,” Azalea said.

“Don’t risk it. It’s a bad idea,” Athena said from the hammock.

“I want to touch one so bad,” Azalea flapped.

The sky dropped cool on Poppy’s forehead. They would go on with their lives.

“I am enjoying this night,” Szerene said to Poppy.

“Day. It’s the *day*, honey,” Athena said.

“Night! We’re in the nighttime.”

Poppy had set fire to everything, turned hallowed into fallow ground: the plains of her life. Poppy sees her face reflected in the glass window of the artists’ house. She has always been outside. Humans, windows, lives. Breaking glass or reaching in or standing, simply watching. She looks up, sees it. All glasses shattered, her life a dandelion. Pulled free.

Floating.

Subject to the wind.

Azalea shook her loose tooth and shook her loose tooth. “It’s trying to get out momma, I feel it.”

“Quit licking. Do you want an apple? Apple makes it fall out.” Apples came tumbling from Athena’s grocery bag. Athena took the children’s drawings of ostriches on cloth pinned to the refrigerator down. “Azalea,” Athena said. “Azalea put down the book and attend to your homework.” Azalea’s nose dripped, she wiped stuffy nose into her sweater sleeve.

“Azalea that’s disgusting. Don’t be disgusting.” Azalea thought she heard a bird fly into the window but no in the book—a bird has flown into the window in her book. She tries, she tries, she’s trying to inhabit this room, but the book pulls her under.

Toes pressed into fish tiles in the tub. Azalea bathed. Her tooth fell out and washed into the sea. Azalea bawled for hours until her hair turned salty. Athena placed a crying towel below her sodden face. Love was: placing scratchy fishies on the floor of a tub *don't slip*. Atop a piece of paper on which she wrote TUTH and tucked under her pillow, Azalea slept at last.

Athena at rehearsal sits ramrod straight for as lead cellist she considers herself on display. Gold clips hold back her heavy hair. She wears all black. She looks in mourning. A music stand between Athena and the other cellist offers its face; the other cellist turns the pages. Athena rehearses before her practice room window in New England on snowy days. Does the white dampen her sound? The distraction of her hair: kept back with a black velvet hairband or signature gold pins. Today on the grass there appears the beautiful remnants of a yellow birthday cake. The new violinist stops and turns and says to Athena: "Too much string." The icing melts in the sun. His hand strokes the air. His pants are rolled up at the legs from where he's come in from biking. He has a smarmy look, yes, absolutely, just like a pirate, on his face and admits to having taken on too many outside gigs. Where does he find time to do anything? It is only then that she notices the hair on his skull has been receding. He takes a banana from his bag and peels it back, slow. Instead of eating the banana he breaks off pieces with his fingers and tosses them into his mouth. She listens to him hem and haw over the philharmonic. He feels guilt over his bid for money, which eventually outweighed his investment in his loftier ambition of becoming a solo artist. She envies him his feeling of newness; she has been with the philharmonic going on seven years.

Athena stands in her blush colored clogs.

"What would it feel like to sit on a cloud?" Szerene asked at night over butter noodles.

“Falling.”

With spring flowers crackling through ice (bulb plants, yes, the irises) Athena took Poppy to hear what she did with her life. They sat side to side, as sisters are wont to do. Poppy placed her feet atop the seat in front of her, Athena bopped her legs down with knuckles. Athena at the symphony holding tight Poppy’s hands, *Your hands are cold*, this— Athena placing Poppy’s hands in her own lap. Her knowing, *her knowing*.

Praise Athena who has cared with her hands. The hands of Athena who goes through her life revealing things—crumpled wrapper paper, airplane. Folded sock. Child’s shoelace. Nibbled triscuit. Paper package. Kindness, her knuckles, the rings on her hands. Precious (braided hair) love knot. Rays of sun through a water glass, refracting. A morning glory. A bird’s face, jewelry, a mirror hanging, again, the bend of light—entrancing. Your mother’s last words, *it was not for free*. Nativity set. Hummingbirds (yes, they’re real). *You pulling on my braid during sex. You. You. Your face, again, the light—enhancing. Entropy. My father’s fears. The scratches on the wood floors. Your back, naked. Light reveals scratches. Sour. Lime in a cut. The sound of a dove’s wings opening.*

“What if I asked you to leave Athena?”

The fog that day tinged the sky a vibrant pink that precluded seeing beyond ten feet. Leander had seen his father’s second marriage collapse after his own mother had shot herself in the head. He knew that he would resent Poppy for bringing about the demise of his stable household. There was no depth of feeling that would heal this disrepair, but he could not tell Poppy this truth without doing damage to her, without making her believe he did not passionately love her. Yet, he loved Athena too. It was a different kind of love, born of

tenderness and respect and fond teasing. He wanted stability and soul-wrenching love, and in his case these desires did not arrive in tandem. If forced to choose, well, frankly, Leander felt torn.

“Do you love me?” Leander asked. She could not say the words. It was too much power. She was not sure love meant anything, and, besides, in saying those words she was giving up something, a thing she felt unwilling to give.

“Do you love me?” Leander repeated. He knew the answer.

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I love you.” He did not return her words as she had feared. Had he said he loved her only to persuade her to embark on an affair with him that first night? The more she experienced the more naïve she seemed to be, as if in becoming world-weary she reverse-aged.

The orange tulips in the vase on the stand had not yet opened their enclosed heads. Poppy took one from the transparent pink vase and snapped off its head. Leander raised an eyebrow at her and picked up the decapitated flower head. “Careful.”

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Leander had the good candlesticks in his hands and he tucked them into the satin lining of their box. He was filled with the caustic retribution of guilty love, and, essentially a child in the guise of a highly articulate man (he was afraid of his own nature), felt a need to wound. The dinner guests remained. He thumbed the rim of the box and took his glass of Chablis in hand.

“There was a period of several years during which I regularly made love to Poppy. It was a foolish tryst, but her wildness excited me. There is nothing I take from those times except the circumference of her internal pain.”

The shine on the silver butter knife produced a shiver.

Athena bit her lower lip. She felt at that moment no concern for her children (stars were being thrown on their wall by a whirring electronic machine); she felt no concern for the years she'd invested in solidifying perceptions of her family's good name; she felt no concern for dog Rose, who bayed at the moon as if it might leap into the house and take off with the maid, Milly.

No.

She thought only of her music. A delayed song. A piece she had failed to master at work that day. This was the sole piece of information, encoded as it was in the strange symbology of sheet music, that Athena could engage. Her arm rehearses the movement as if to resuscitate elbow space. Three cadenzas had tripped up her tempo and made her lose pace. She looks up.

“Do you have proof?”

“Why would you ask—”

“Do you have proof?” The look of leaping notes on Leander's face reminds her she must think wings—think wings! to make the proper arm movements for her cello suite. She smiles.

Athena's face.

Longfellow Lane, Dec. 23rd

Love turned so quickly to hate.

I despise you. Poppy thought. You don't even value her.

Athena.

Athena wept over the beautiful love letters of Poppy. And what were they proof of? Poppy's betrayal or passion? Did Athena weep out of heartache or terror at the perversity of love?

Milly. Walking down the street. Crying. Kinky hair. Nodding politely to the gentlemen walking contra her down the sidewalk. Then her face contorts in sadness. Mildred, let down your hair, your dreams. She has been let go, the artists were moving away. Typical. Mildred sat atop her hands. She took a twenty from under her brassiere in her drawer. The lollipop she has left in the teacup of orange juice has partially dissolved. Milly with all the love sapped out of her. She had a nasal voice, a puggy nose, and soft dimples. Did not emote, was easily startled, rolled up her shirt sleeves. After the artists moved to New York City, Milly became an executive assistant. She wanted to be at the right hand of power. Her blue hair returned to auburn. She was never seen without her long amber hair blown out and curled. She assumed the perfumed affectations of her former employer, sanctimoniously taking phone messages on a notepad and typing memos.

Sleeping with Poppy had made Leander love Athena more.

It should not surprise you.

Now Leander paints another person. Herein lies the true danger of artists. Inside their endless ability to reimagine the human form, they become their own best creations. Living works of art. If Leander had been like an envelope sliced open in his art, he starts sealing up the edges assuring minimal exposures. He makes a series of windowpanes. Pure see-through glass. “You’re a termite released from a glass. You know that feeling when you’re far from home and you’re not sure you’ll find your way back? That is how I felt making love to you.” Like all formerly trapped creatures who crave expansion, Poppy found herself fumbling, beleaguered, without the necessary armature to confront the sharp contours of the world and the vicissitudes of life.

“This was you at your best,” Ned said, referring to a photograph of Poppy three years back tethered to their white lab. “If I could go back and freeze you: be the wonder of youth.”

Ned was confronted with human suffering. He walked away. Poppy no longer conformed to his standards of gregariousness, purity, and sophistication. He sent her a letter typed and printed and paper clipped to divorce papers. That he could not assume responsibility for their severance face-to-face did not disturb her—it confirmed her essential understanding of him as ferociously self-involved. (Somethings beautiful about Ned shoehorned here: he was playful and made Poppy laugh with his teasing like no one had made her before. Praise his smile even as he slices her, cutting things, his teeth could pull her apart in bed or with words. He was an excellent friend—always helping others with a recommendation at work. He undertook a stringent diet and exercise routine with methodical discipline. He gave money to homeless Styrofoam cups.)

“Please don’t touch me. I don’t want to be touched.” Ned had shelved, housed, and cultivated an insidious plant, whose roots seemed to strangle living things in its vicinity, ambition, capable only of granting leeway to the formidable, fierce, fleet. *What guides you?* His lack of earnest communication kept her away. She turned toward the sky in silent pleading.

“Ours is no longer a pretty story,” Ned said. He reached out to caress her arm.

“Don’t,” she said, “Don’t.” (This is the final pillowcase we shall look inside of for Ned bore no wounds. He was made of metal so darts clanked back metallically to the ground. He could never forgive her. She had made a childish mistake. She had made this mistake over and over. His decision, he felt, was foolproof, inevitable, strategic, well-guided. He was impatient with fools who flew by heart.) The knowledge that she was replaceable to Ned was an impediment to her breathing. “You’re a coward,” Poppy wrote across his article on the front page of the New York Times, her pen dipping into newspapers folds, “I know who you are.”

She had not understood love before Ned forsook her. Love was what kept people together despite annoying habits, sounds they made that frustrated, unnatural outbursts; it was enduring care. A feeling that upon going away from one beloved they could return to one another for human shelter. She overheard Ned on the phone with his brother Ryo before he left.

“She is broken,” he had been saying, “She can’t be fixed.”

It had been many years since Poppy had visited her father. She went to see him. He lived a few blocks away from their old house, now. He owned a pool. Fall leaves floated on it; he swam mornings and relished the smell of chlorine. Her mother had passed three years earlier, her breast cancer having returned. Poppy had wounded the one person she loved more than anyone else in the world, the one person she believed to be beautifully resplendent in bearing and behavior. Poppy remembered how sometimes Leander would be depressed and Athena, instead of babying him or guiding him out from the dark soot of gloom, would boot him and his funk (unwelcome visitor) into the guest room and carry on living. And this was exactly the right thing to do. This was exactly the best thing to do. Athena who still clipped coupons for the grocery store also gave away never worn clothes with the tags still attached. It was this discrepancy, this character flaw, which had led Poppy to believe Athena might've one day absolved her of all sin.

But she had so much more in common with her father than she could ever imagine. She too had wanted to escape her hometown. Her father because Mexico was corrupt, filthy and he bought into the myth of the American dream; Poppy because Santa Monica was pristine with too many strip malls and fake lights, fake eyelashes, fake delight, so she could not tell which were the true things. It was as if you could stick something beautiful over something ugly and in the desire to believe in the beautiful crave it artificially. Poppy, too, had been in love with a false dream: hers one of travel and culture where she could unlock doors with her clever tongue. She remembers weekend treks to the Mexican supermarket with her father and coming home and her mother, who was white, saying to her that she would like to straighten Poppy's hair. Untamed. Remembers church on Sundays with her father and Athena, how Athena would sing from the hymnal and Poppy would imagine

running up onto the altar and smashing her hands into the holy cross. The decision had been made in their household to swallow their Mexican culture in her mother's whiteness, because these values would move them all up. The girls would pass. And the one thing her father never spoke of (having abandoned his sister back in Mexico) was so alike Poppy's greatest reckoning, what she had done to her sister, an erasure of sibling loyalty.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, precious?"

"When I was abducted, was it my fault?"

"I wish the world could be safe for you. We love you no matter what."

"Not true."

"You're a mother."

Lily pours imaginary water from a plastic watering can. Lily was lucky; she would have no sibling whose life she had the power to pull out. She would forge her own bonds to break or preserve in the world, to nurture, to grow. "When are we going to visit Sezy?" Lily asks.

Poppy's destruction was exquisite, inexorable.

"Why did you do it?" her father wanted to know. "Athena loves you still." He accepted Poppy's monstrosity because she was his child. He felt responsible for her abduction.

"I don't know." But she did know. The same reason the butterflies dipped into dahlias in the yard. The same reason her lips desired to destroy dandelions. The moment you blow on a dandelion setting free its white puff-like hair is the most beautiful moment: the lips desiccating. Life, lit. Lifting fresh alive floating free. Holy fuck. The air. Fleeting. Pull.

Destroy. Sink your hands in the dirt.

God knows.

The butterflies kissed each flower, gently, gently. Lying down in the gaping mouths of flowers, red and white, red, white, streaming in rows. The rows of flowers wound her. The rows of flowers planted in dirt. She was amazed. She woke. She saw the sky: cloudless. Blue. The butterflies come and religiously perform their duty. Silently they alight, kiss the flowers.

Where did Athena go from here? Her cello performances grew in virtuosity and thus unbound from her sister in spirit she grew in notoriety for a piercing poignancy on stage. She moved with Leander and her daughters from New Hampshire to New York City where she took on a soloist role and took Leander to couple's counseling. She relaxed about certain things—the family's socks were all tossed into a basket in the laundry room, instead of paired neatly, they were allowed to roam freely. Her children in mismatched socks. Though Athena would never speak to Poppy again, she wore an image of a flower inside a locket that thumped rhythmically against her chest as she walked Rose between snow-laden pines at twilight.

Poppy had returned to the house where she had been held captive for three days on her visit to Santa Monica. She had had to contact the precinct to ascertain its whereabouts. Upon returning to Santa Monica Poppy felt confronted with the distinctively dark overtones of — the weather on the tarmac forbade rain. In other cities, she breathed. In constantly moving she had sought to relocate wounds and find respite from darkness. She had needed to go back to the first exposure. She had needed to put her eyes up before the images. Seeing did not take them away but made it possible to breathe. She wanted first and foremost to feel safe. The wound still sung. If she could learn to laugh in the midst of it, she would be able to

prolong the exposure, invite light into the frame, and suffuse the original image in brightness, whitewashing her disgrace.

And what has this book been anyway if not the snapshots of an unwillingness to reckon?

Full exposure. First the darkness, then—

Dusk on beach waves. Everything she knows about destruction she learned in this place. Someone has twisted a bouquet of beautiful blue and silver star balloons beside the blue door. The blue door opens. It does not reveal her wound. A family lives here now. A child surrounded not by cobwebs, crates, broken bookshelves and news-papered windows blocking out light but rooms brimming with toys, breakfast plates, and children's shoes, the detritus of a family's ever-changing life. These belongings will be outgrown and thrown away. The child runs out. She lives here. The family loads into the silver version of identical cars.

They leave. Luminous, the star balloons reflect ripples of light onto the porch. We are reminded, here, of water, its strings of light spangled from sun. The beautiful metallic star balloons festoon the brick building level with the tree boughs. Poppy is not surprised. She has found pinned inside the lapel of the most horrible things tokens, reminders, that piercing the ugly are always things beautiful. There is some element unique to the atmosphere of terror that makes beauty all the more illustrious. A chrysanthemum, a dove, the constant fold in a baby's wrist, a family of flagrant stars, an escape. Everything she knows about survival she learned in this place. It had needed to be so much worse before it could get better. The blue door grows near. It had been thirty years. *Open your hand.* She is ready. The sound of screaming startles her from her reverie. She is no longer afraid when it comes. It is the sound of the train, welcoming her home.