HOLLER

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Brittany L. Winland

Thesis Committee:

Subramanian Shankar, Chairperson

Nandini Chandra

Noʻukahauʻoli Revilla

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Dedication

For Clint, who has spent twenty years believing I can do things that scare me, and my children, Sophia, Benjamin, and Miles—when I tell my own story, you are the best parts.

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Abstract

This is a work of fiction that uses the short story collection format to present a range of stories and perspectives set in West Virginia. Inspired by Thomas King's words—"the truth about stories is that that's all we are"—these stories work to complicate and diversify the available narratives surrounding Appalachia and the people who live there. Drawing from ideas in mythology, posthumanism, ecocriticism, and embodied rhetorics, the collection looks to West Virginia's past while asking questions about its future, particularly in terms of land and environment.

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Critical Introduction

Holler is a collection of short fiction set in West Virginia, and an attempt on my part to join the multi-vocal effort of storytellers working to (re)story the land and its people with complexity and nuance instead of the flat stereotypes that usually abound in the pop culture imagination of the area. I am inspired and influenced by the work of writers like Ann Pancake, Mesha Maren, Scott McClanahan, Irene McKinney, and Crystal Good, who offer fresh and contemporary looks at West Virginia in their poetry and fiction. Appalachia is my home, even as I have strayed far from her borders; my voice, although I have modulated and lost most of my accent; my community, even when I have struggled to find my place within it; my identity, although perhaps the part I have denied the longest. West Virginia is a place in a John Denver song—almost heaven, I hear. West Virginia is not a place you go on vacation, though—it's a place you escape. West Virginia is a joke and a riddle. The cynical part of me knows that no one really cares about West Virginia except West Virginians—the other part of me wrote *Holler*.

Appalachia is a cultural region stretching from southern New York to northern Alabama and Georgia, "following the spine of the Appalachian Mountains," and West Virginia is the only state to be entirely encompassed within it ("The Appalachia Region"). With its long history of isolation and exploitation, both the region and the state have often been the face of poverty and ignorance for the rest of the nation. Although Appalachia provided a large portion of the country's coal, it proved an easy place to ignore—to turn on the lights and turn off the attention.

Periodically the media rediscovers Appalachia and descends to photograph the most destitute hollers, to splash images of rundown cabins or rusted trailers—depending on the decade

—and dying coal towns across its coverage of a place outsiders only seem to notice when noticing makes them feel superior. The most recent spate of pieces about West Virginia cropped up during and after the 2016 presidential election, when the media focused on the state's support for Donald Trump. "In The Heart of Trump Country," published in The New Yorker, painted this picture of the state:

> The poorer hollers were crowded with ancient trailers, many with a 'No Trespassing' or a 'Private Property' sign on them. There was a lot of theft, because of drugs—in some parts of West Virginia, the prescription-drug-addiction epidemic was worse than anywhere else in the country. (MacFarquhar)

This coverage is emblematic of the image that outside media—including Hollywood—prefers about Appalachia as a whole. The narrative sells because it is both entertaining and satisfying; it paints West Virginia as just foreign enough to fascinate but feel nonthreatening at the same time. Appalachia is a *problem*, and there is an appetite for explanations that point to the culpability of the hillbillies living there. *Hillbilly Elegy*, a popular book by J.D. Vance which he subtitles, "a memoir of a family and culture in crisis," fetishizes an imagined white, Scots-Irish monoculture in Appalachia only to then posit that this "hillbilly culture" has degraded to the point that poor Appalachians—lazy, self-defeating, prone to addiction—bear the blame for the region's poverty and opioid struggle, rather than decades of extractive industrial exploitation and a targeted flood of oxycontin by drug companies (Vance). Vance's solution—that long-cherished conservative fairytale of poor people pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps—is a tidy one that absolves everyone of blame except the hillbilly.

Believing in some kind of inherent cultural flaw in Appalachians is easier than examining the industrial practices and labor conditions that have historically devastated the region. Trump's political rise was inexplicable to many people, and placing its epicenter in a state like West Virginia puts the discomfort at a distance—even though West Virginia only contributed five electoral votes to Trump, while Florida gave twenty-nine and Texas offered thirty-eight (Kiersz). Elizabeth Catte, who wrote *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* in response to the media's election coverage of the region, says, "I think it's a basic kind of psychological desire that there is a place where everything that's toxic and not progressive can be compartmentalized" (Penaluna). For liberals, West Virginia became an easy target for blame after Trump's election—after all, it's far easier to blame the dumb, racist hillbillies in a place you've probably never been than take a hard look at your own neighbors, friends, and sometimes family members.

In many ways, Appalachia is the country's dumping ground. The coal industry extracts fossil fuel without regard to the ways it devastates the mountains and wreaks havoc on the land itself; chemical companies knowingly leach chemicals into local water supplies; drug companies flood the region with opioids as overdose deaths climb to the highest in the nation (Eyre). But in the story of Appalachia, the hillbilly—backward, ignorant, dirty both physically and morally—has brought all this upon themself. As Barbara Ellen Smith describes, the attitude toward Appalachia remains that, "it's only a region of trash, so why not trash it" (*Hillbilly*)?

Stories are powerful. As Thomas King says, "the truth about stories is that that's all we are," and the story of Appalachia has mostly been told by those living outside it. Perhaps nowhere is this more clear than in the cultural construction of the hillbilly. Alternatively, the hillbilly is laughable (the Clampetts), pitiable (barefoot, hungry children), violent (the Hatfields

and McCoys), or defective and dangerous (*Deliverance*). Through these stories, Appalachian people are told about themselves and their communities. As Todd Snyder writes:

> The Hillbilly has been well documented, bought, sold, and told for a profit. He is in no position to speak for himself. The Hillbilly has been told his own story from the perspective of others. Thus, at some point in his life, the Hillbilly finds himself Appalachian. He discovers himself just as you discover him. It is a story of backwoods hollers, ripe with clannish violence and rural poverty. (8)

This moment of discovering yourself through the stereotypes in stories told about you is a memorable one, and of course not unique to Appalachia—stereotypes "do vicious cultural work" along lines of race, class, and ethnicity all over the world (Smith, *Hillbilly*). I cannot remember when I learned to be ashamed of being from West Virginia, but it began well before I ever left the state. By high school, I was counting down the days until I could escape. Taught that the accent of my community would make me sound stupid to the outside world, I carefully trained myself not to replicate its most noticeable markers. I didn't want to talk like a hillbilly. Today I find I cannot slip back easily into that tilting, lilting sound—not even when I want to—and only recently has this become a source of sadness instead of satisfaction. I have surprised myself during my time in the Masters program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa by focusing my fiction on West Virginia; I couldn't wait to leave, and now it's all I seem to write about.

In the documentary *Hillbilly*, Kentucky writer Silas House says, "Appalachia is a wound and a joy and a poem. A knot of complication. But you cannot know a place without loving it and hating it and feeling everything in between." In *Holler*, I hope to add nuance to the story of the hillbilly, and to explore that complication—all the mixed feelings about home that I know so

well. It's important to me that any depiction I write of West Virginia include joy as well as hardship. Equally, I never want to deny or downplay the very real problems of the region, or the ways in which it is hard to be Queer or Brown or Indigenous in Appalachia. A key problem with many depictions of the region—and the figure of the hillbilly—is that diversity is erased. Appalachia is home to people of color, although they are too often left out of the narrative—both outside the region and within it, too. "Affrilachia" is a term first coined by poet Frank X Walker, an act of naming "to render the invisible visible" and to insist on making space for the spectrum of people who call the region home; "Since 1991, the Affrilachian Poets have been writing together, defying the persistent stereotype of a racially homogenized rural region" ("Welcome"). That Walker had to insist he could be both an Appalachian poet and an African American poet speaks to the dangerous pervasiveness of simple steroetypes. Because the very narrow story of what Appalachia is—and what it *can* be—is so persistent, Appalachians can fall into the trap of believing that issues of race don't pertain to us. It took leaving West Virginia (along with a lot of reading for college courses) for me to understand that I hold white privilege, and many of my own family and community members still in West Virginia have a hard time with the concept. Because they have been openly mocked for so long, and because West Virginia is consistently portrayed as one of the poorest states in the country, intersectionality is a hard sell. The lack of diverse perspectives about and within Appalachia is a practice that impoverishes everyone and cuts us off from making connections across our communities.

Growing up in the West Virginia public education system, I was taught that there were no Native tribes living in the area when white settlers arrived; the arrowheads, pottery shards, and burial mounds—one of which I grew up beside and played on as a child—were artifacts of a

long-extinct civilization. This was utter nonsense, of course. It's true that the Adena and Hopewell people—the mound builders—were no longer around during colonization, but the land comprising modern day West Virginia was occupied by different tribes in various ways, whether permanent villages or seasonal hunting grounds ("Early Native American Cultures"). These included Iroquoian tribes, Cherokee tribes, and Algonquin tribes—notably the Shawnee and Delaware (Maslowski). It would, of course, be more convenient to believe that West Virginia was uninhabited rather than acknowledge that we live on the land Indigenous people were displaced and removed from, and the narrative I was taught—focusing on prehistoric and pre-contact tribes—reinforced the erroneous and harmful story that Indigenous people exist only in the past. That we need not concern ourselves with them now, even though there are Native Americans currently living in West Virginia. It divorces us from responsibility, but also from potential. I am struck by Robin Wall Kimmerer's concept of the honorable harvest in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, where she writes:

> Taking coal buried deep in the earth, for which we must inflict irreparable damage, violates every precept of the code. By no stretch of the imagination is coal 'given' to us. We have to wound the land and water to gouge it from Mother Earth. What if a coal company planning mountaintop removal in the ancient folds of the Appalachians were compelled by law to take only that which is given? Don't you long to hand them the laminated card and announce that the rules have changed? (187)

How different the story of Appalachia might have unfolded if we honored Indigenous ways of caring for the land. When the narratives we write of history distort and distance us from Indigenous voices, though, we are missing even the first very crucial step in doing so.

There are many shades of hillbilly. I cannot know what it's like to be Brown or Indigenous in West Virginia, but I know the confusion of being a young queer woman there. In a story not unique to the region itself, I grew up in a conservative, religious, blue collar family, and for a long time did not even know a name for my own desires. While West Virginia remains a conservative place, it's important to remember that it is home to many people of diverse sexual orientations and genders. In fact, a 2017 study by UCLA found that West Virginia has the highest per capita number of teenagers who identify as transgender, a fact that many people find surprising because it doesn't fit the standard image of the state and its people ("UCLA"). But what if more of our stories included and reflected this diversity? We are our stories—the reason I couldn't call my first girlfriend *my girlfriend* was because I didn't know the language, had never been shown the possibilities that stories and their telling allow us. The truth is that West Virginians need outsiders to see a wider array of diverse stories about us, but just as critically, we need to see them ourselves. Stories are possibility.

The four stories in this collection explore class and race, the frequency of labor disasters and death in West Virginia, and environmental issues. While I plan to add at least two more stories to the collection, the time to focus on multiple revisions, and to refine these stories with the help of feedback, has been very rewarding.The title of the collection—*Holler*—is also the title of one of the stories, but feels like an appropriate locus of theme and subject matter for the project as a whole. *Holler* is a staple of Appalachian English, the dialect of the mountains where I grew up. It's a word understood to be outside of proper English usage, and as such functions as a marker of difference, with various and complex connotations depending on the usage. Today the word *holler* has two main and distinct meanings. The first, "to call out," is also the oldest

variant: “She’s hollering for help.” The Oxford English Dictionary puts this first known use in the sixteenth century, in intransitive verb form, as an alternative of the verb *hollo*, which is also related to *halloo*, or “to call to hounds during a hunt.” According to Etymology Online, its current usage in American English began around the 1690s and can also be related to *hello*: “Don’t forget to holler at grandpa when you’re passing through.” To *holler* is also to gripe or complain: “They always holler about the taxes.” As a noun, it is the actual shout or cry—“He gave a holler when he stubbed his toe,” or “Give me a holler when you come to town.”

The second meaning of *holler* comes from a dialectical variation of the word *hollow*, from the Old English *holh*, or “cave” (“Hollow”). It refers to a valley between mountains and is widely used in Appalachian vernacular: “I come from the hills and hollers of West Virginia,” or “Her house is down in the holler.” Although the dialectal practice of pronouncing the ending -*ow* sound as -*er* can be seen in some other forms (*yellow* as *yeller*), *holler* now exists in culture as a word on its own, separate from a simple difference of pronunciation. (Even when other vernacular pronunciations have disappeared in speech—when *yellow* is pronounced with the -*ow* intact, for example—a *holler* is still a *holler* and not a *hollow*.) *Holler* in its first definition is markedly vernacular, but *holler* in its second form is even more so, and far less diffuse in its spread and its usage.

Holler is a vernacular word that can function as a sign—calling a valley a *holler* is a way of recognizing a fellow Appalachian—and also becomes a word of negotiation for many Appalachians when they interact with the larger world beyond. Because *holler* is such a marker of place, and with that, culture and class and often politics, and because the vernacular tradition it embodies is so fraught with history and stereotypes, *holler* often becomes a place where code-

switching occurs; to sound “smarter,” or less like a “hillbilly,” it can be dropped in favor of a more acceptable word.

Hollers are places and place names in Appalachia, and more particularly (especially in the narratives of non-Appalachians), they are places and place names in rural, mostly poor, and often underserved (educationally, medically) Appalachian communities. The perception of people living outside of Appalachia gives the word *holler* in this context much of its current cultural and political weight. Dialect and vernacular words mark boundaries of region and class—in the story of Appalachia, a *holler* is a depressed place—an ignorant place—where poor white hillbillies live who are either racist or just economically desperate, depending on which political party is talking about them.

For someone living in West Virginia, and more broadly, Appalachia, deliberate use of the word *holler* is a badge, defiant and proud. Appalachians know what the rest of the country thinks of them. They are told constantly, by politicians, through poverty-porn photojournalism and in jokes about shoes and teeth and cousins. I’ve heard a West Virginia incest joke every place I’ve lived and at every university I’ve attended, including UHM. *Holler* is also a word of defensive pride. Like the stories in this collection, *holler* is a word of very real love for the valleys cut long ago by ancient rivers and the mountains rising around them on every side, and for the communities that grow in those *hollers*, for and in spite of all their faults and difficulties. *Holler*—like those communities which are overlooked except when it is politically convenient to invoke them—is persistent, stereotypically low-class, fraught with history, and complicated by tangled emotions of pride and shame. In short, it’s a perfect description of what I hope these stories do and represent.

"Hillbilly Mythology," the first story in the collection, is based on a true event that happened near my hometown, at Pleasants Power Station in Willow Island, West Virginia, the year before my father started work there. On April 27, 1978, a cooling tower under construction at the plant collapsed as the twenty-ninth layer of concrete was being poured and all fifty-one men working on it fell 170 feet to their deaths. One local family, which my husband belongs to, lost eleven of its members. The disaster, which is still considered the deadliest construction accident in U.S. history, was the result of missing bolts and inadequate time allowed for the previous day's concrete to cure (Peterson). Although I frame my story with something that did happen—four Steele brothers fell from the tower that day, and a fifth was elsewhere in the plant at the time and survived—the characters based on them are entirely fictionalized. The four brothers who died are represented in their final moments on the tower, and their older brother—the survivor, Rob—narrates and mythologizes the loss.

My intention in incorporating the language and imagery of mythology—patterned largely on Greek mythos—is twofold: I want to highlight the prevalence of West Virginia bodies being treated as expendable by the industries and bosses they labor under, and I also want to insist that those bodies—and the region itself—are as worthy of being mythologized as anywhere else. What would an Appalachian—a hillbilly—mythology look like? I think it would grapple with tremendous loss, but also a defensive pride in the region's long struggle for survival and a fierce love for family. And underlying everything, always, the land itself—the mountains and hollers, the rivers and streams.

The mythology I imagine for West Virginia must of course grapple with coal—with the long practice of men and women (and for a long time, children) tunneling underground, through

and within the mountains—and the complicated legacy of coal within the region. Coal fed families. Men died for it. It built the towns in West Virginia, and when coal jobs dried up it left them standing as ghosts of themselves. It leveled mountains and poisoned streams and, in this era of the Anthropocene, there is no denying that our reliance on burning coal and other fossil fuels for power has brought us to our current climate catastrophe. In West Virginia, coal has been sustenance and curse, and it has a unique cultural resonance. In "Hillbilly Mythology" the brothers think they have escaped coal's darker dangers (mine collapse, poison gas, black lung) by becoming ironworkers—rather than dig down below the earth, they build cooling towers for a coal-burning power plant and rise above the ground. When the tower's concrete fails, and the men fall from the sky, there are echoes of the Icarus myth, and when Rob takes his journey into the mountain to find his dead brothers and bring them back, the story of Orpheus and the Underworld come to mind. These are resonant associations, but the story's mythology is much more reliant on the dichotomies of coal miner / ironworker, progress / destruction, and past / future.

Environmental concerns and uncaring corporations continue to play a large role in "Alarum," which also has its roots in true events. DuPont, a chemical giant that operated a large site in Parkersburg, West Virginia—about seventeen miles downriver from where I grew up—knowingly dumped C8, or PFOA (used to make, among other things, Teflon), into a landfill near the Tennant family's dairy farm. The run-off went right into the farm's creek, which was the water source for the Tennants' cows, and around 1998 they began to exhibit horrifying symptoms before succumbing to painful deaths. Local veterinarians, law enforcement and lawyers refused to help the Tenants; DuPont was the largest employer in the area (Rich). Again, the characters in

"Alarum" are fictionalized, but the scale of harm that DuPont caused is very real, and not at all confined to Parkersburg, or West Virginia, or even Appalachia. As Nathaniel Rich reported for *The New York Times*:

> …if you are a sentient being reading this article in 2016, you already have PFOA in your blood. It is in your parents' blood, your children's blood, your lover's blood. How did it get there? Through the air, through your diet, through your use of nonstick cookware, through your umbilical cord. Or you might have drunk tainted water…Where scientists have tested for the presence of PFOA in the world, they have found it.

Like the proverbial canary in the coal mine, the suffering of Appalachians often heralds and warns of oncoming danger to the rest of the nation.

Maryann, the main character in "Alarum," suffers a series of medical issues: treatment for breast cancer damages her heart, necessitating a valve replacement. Thinking of the cows on their farm, and one cow in particular—her favorite, Flossie—Maryann chooses to use bovine tissue for the replacement. Throughout the story, Maryann is forced to reckon with the ways in which everything on earth affects every other thing, the ways that humans are bound up with animals but also with trash and coal and chemicals we cannot even see with the naked eye. I took inspiration from Jane Bennett's vital materiality, in which things exert an agency of their own, and in which nothing thrown away or hidden out of sight is ever actually gone.

> If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared vital materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects…Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its power will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a

> greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inexplicably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. (Bennett 13)

After Maryann receives her bovine valve, she learns that an astounding array of products we buy are made from parts of cows, from dental floss to motor oil to contraceptive creams. She begins to dream in a new way as she starts to sense what Timothy Morton calls the mesh in *The Ecological Thought*:

> It is a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise…The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so not is fully "itself." (8, 15)

The bond Maryann feels with Flossie, and cows in general, is messy and strange as she works through the realization that they are constituted by and with each other, and that all of them—all of life, all of matter—is now harmed and harming. In the mesh, we become aware that our wellbeing is connected to and dependent upon all forms of life on earth. This kind of entanglement—this "radical intimacy"—is uncomfortable, but for Maryann there is, inexplicably, a sense of joy entwined with sorrow.

Hannah, a young woman about to embark on a move from her small town to a large university out of state, faces sorrow as her beloved grandmother declines, along with fear around the looming change in "and also with you." The title, part of a call-and-response exchange in the Catholic mass, both reinforces the theme of change—the Vatican changed the liturgical translation in 2001 to "and with your spirit," which Hannah's grandmother struggles with—and

the constant familial back-and-forth by which Hannah knows herself and her place in the world. Hannah's reluctance to leave her hometown—and West Virginia itself—lies not only in a desire to help her grandmother continue living in her own house instead of a nursing home, but in Hannah's suspicion that her accent and origin will mark her as different. This draws from my own experience in higher education, which mostly confirmed for me that academia did not value dialect or diversions from standard English. While I was willing to convert, leaping to leave and remake myself, Hannah digs in her heels. The fact remains, though, that for many young West Virginians in search of good education programs and well-paying jobs, the only option is to leave the state.

In "Holler," Maren has done just that; college and then work has kept her in Chicago, but over a long weekend she comes home for a visit, bringing along her black girlfriend, Edie. "Holler" is full of quiet conflict—people misunderstanding each other, loved ones failing with the best intentions—and all the complicated feelings of someone who loves their home and is also sometimes frustrated and ashamed by it. The holler—her home on Sugar Creek, for Maren—is the perfect place for race and class to intersect in interesting ways; Edie, who comes from a well-off urban family, is assumed by Maren's family and neighbors to be a low-income "inner city kid," while Edie, having read a few of the Trump country articles mentioned earlier, expects a poor collection of rusted trailers and pill addicts, and sometimes sounds a little condescending when she speaks to Maren's family. Racism isn't always intentional or malignant, and while Maren's family, and many people I know back in West Virginia, would never consider themselves to be racists, they have blind spots and prejudices all the same.

While stereotypes of hillbillies and Appalachia have clearly done their work on Evie as well, in "Holler" I wanted to admit, or to complicate the narrative, by acknowledging that some stereotypes have a basis in a lived reality. Maren's aunt, long addicted to painkillers after a workplace accident, fleshes out the real and urgent opioid crisis in West Virginia. I hope that Liz humanizes the face of opioid users in some small measure. While addiction has taken a hard toll on her, she remains an important part of Maren's family and community—while her life is hard, she still has time for flowers planted along the porch. In her pain, she still finds beauty and joy, and she, like every addict, has a life worth living.

The crisis of opioid addiction in West Virginia is another example of unethical companies preying upon a region that no one else really cares about. Drug companies intentionally flooded West Virginia communities with painkillers that doctors were pushed to prescribe:

> The trail of painkillers leads to West Virginia's southern coalfields, to places like Kermit, population 392. There, out-of-state drug companies shipped nearly 9 million highly addictive—and potentially lethal—hydrocodone pills over two years to a single pharmacy in the Mingo County town. Rural and poor, Mingo County has the fourth-highest prescription opioid death rate of any county in the United States.
>
> In six years, drug wholesalers showered the state with 780 million hydrocodone and oxycodone pills, while 1,728 West Virginians fatally overdosed on those two painkillers, a Sunday Gazette-Mail investigation found. The unfettered shipments amount to 433 pain pills for every man, woman and child in West Virginia. (Eyre)

It is only recently that big pharmaceutical companies like Purdue Pharma, which peddles OxyContin—the drug that made the Sackler family $10.7 billion—have faced any consequences

for their deliberate and targeted assault (Warren and Rogers). As usual, it seems as though the rest of the country only took notice and began to care when the opioid epidemic spread to other regions, too. West Virginia, the canary in the coal mine.

In "Holler," Maren finds a resolution of sorts to her tangled emotions and competing desires in what often brings me (and I know I'm not alone in this) the greatest pleasure and the most overwhelming sense of homesickness—the mountains themselves. One of my aims in this collection is to place the landscape in conversation as fully as the human characters are, to create a sense of both the mountains' incredible beauty and their central symbolic force—their intense, fervent entanglement—with the people and communities that inhabit Appalachia. The relationship is not always a healthy one—we have strip-mined the mountains and blown their tops off to reach the coal inside them—but it is impossible to separate Appalachia from its mountains. We love our mountains. We hurt our mountains. We cling to them all the same. Like Maren, "all [my] dreams look like the rolling backs of mountains stretching out in every direction," and this collection is in part a hymn of praise to the ways they have shaped me and still call me home, no matter how far I have travelled (94).

My relationship with Appalachia—with *home*—is complicated, but the more I write about it, the more I understand the words of Silas House—"you cannot know a place without loving it and hating it and feeling everything in between." I hope that *Holler* sits in that complication and offers some worthwhile stories to join other Appalachian works as they build a fuller, more nuanced, and more fully human representation of the mountains I love and the communities nestled into its hollers.

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"Appalachia is a wound and a joy and a poem. A knot of complication. But you cannot know a place without loving it and hating it and feeling everything in between."

—Silas House, *Hillbilly*

Hillbilly Mythology

1.

I didn't go up the tower that morning because one of the concrete trucks was late, and their receptionist kept me on hold for damn near half an hour while she tried to figure it all out. She was a young thing, could tell it from the voice over the line—something breathy and sweet in every vowel, a sound like feathers in her throat, all her words too fresh to have built up a rind.

At the time, I don't know that I minded much. The door to the trailer was open, and all the windows too, April morning rolling its shoulders, cracking its knuckles as the sun crawled up the sky.

There's nothing in the world like an April morning in these hills: the air cool and electric, slinking toward summer with winter's lipstick still all over its collar. The world wakes in green. Each morning on my way to work, every curl of the road shows off a new wonder—thin streams of water running off the mountain, painting black ribbons onto its sheared rock side; shocks of new ferns poking through last year's dead leaves, their bright heads still furled into tight spirals; around the foundations of old buildings and in patches sprinkled along ditches, the flamed gems of tiger lilies on top their long stems point like arrows toward the sky. Mike called them shit-house lilies.

It was no hardship, really, to sit there in that empty office with the mid-morning sun coming in the open windows. Even ground-level near the coal piles, even with the whole power plant bustling greased and sweating around me. There was plenty of work ahead, and I had never looked the gift horse of an unexpected rest in the mouth.

But my brothers were on the tower without me. One hundred and seventy feet up, on platforms bolted to the twenty-eighth layer of concrete poured the day before, and hauling up fresh buckets to add another ring. Racing to finish, caught up in the wave of the company's hurry, the rush-rush of progress and promise. Twenty-nine layers higher by nightfall. Twenty-nine trips closer to the sun.

The young receptionist came back on the line. I imagined her down at the office in Parkersburg, twirling her hair around her finger, tapping an ink pen against her bubblegum pink mouth. Then a strange sound snuck in through the open door. It reminded me of a belt unbuckling, sliding slow from the loops, but metallic. Wrong. The girl was still talking but I'd stopped listening, my hearing pitched now toward the bodies of my brothers, perched in the sky, the constellation by which I knew myself. My own body knew, down in the guts and muck, in whatever trembles liquid inside the bones, that it was not where it was supposed to be. I rose. I left the brown plastic receiver hanging from its wire, the young voice with feathers calling and unanswered. I passed through that open door, my body ringing like a bell, seeking out its echoes.

Then came the deep rumble and the boom. The world split in two. Later, people would recall what it looked like—the scaffolds falling like dominoes, the tower unravelling, opened up like a tin can. Tons of concrete crashing to the earth. A few of the bodies falling, thrown clear from the rest. But all I remember is the sound. Fifty-one men fell from the sky that April morning, and none of them survived.

Tom

He has fallen before.

From the barn loft, egged on by Jerod. From a swing at school, kicked up as high as he could get it and then letting go, his body winged for a single moment and then slapped back to earth. From the back porch the first time he tried Wild Turkey, Dan's flushed, laughing face looking down at him, haloed by the porch light.

He fell into her, Susan, down in the low pasture where his family used to keep two horses, long gone. Crushed grass beneath their bodies, sweet and sun-smelling. The long summer afternoon spreading open in front of them. Susan with two high spots of color always pinking the skin along her cheekbones. Susan, who somehow always looked astonished, no matter her mood. He fell into her easy, all slide and sink, salt in the crook of her neck and on his tongue. He has never seen the ocean but he knows it could not be better than Susan's skin folding him up like a letter, holding the mystery of himself that he cannot guess.

Susan was salted water but he was metal, long-day hot, sun-forged. He was the till he took to the garden come spring, every spring for his mama. The hard piece that turns up the earth, that turns it over toward its unborn roots. All around them, a good dirt smell. Dry grass and cows wandering the field above. The good animal smell. He knew nothing better than dirt and warm animal bodies and he took his place gladly among them, in the smell of the day, opened.

He has fallen before. His body turns itself in the air, head down like an infant readying for birth. Susan whispered to him just last week, a secret growing in her garden, and he is falling again now to the good dirt. He is falling and he is a seed now too.

He is falling and he is already planted.

2.

I am the oldest. Five boys, all of us ironworkers. My brothers, one by one, had followed me to that place of coal-fired combustion and cooling towers belching steam. It was supposed to be a better life—better than our daddy's, anyway, digging coal. Mama made me promise, when I was sixteen and looking for work, that I would never go down in the mines.

I stayed above ground—rose from it, in fact, on steel beams and girders climbing high into buildings, spanning rivers into bridges. When we started on the cooling tower, though, Mama fretted.

"It's too high," she said. "I don't like it."

"You ought to love it," I told her. "Your boys climbing closer to God and all."

"But you're only men," Mama said. "You're not made for the sky."

After the men and the tower fell, the volunteer firehouse was turned into a morgue, and I went inside it and I identified my brothers in a strange backwards order. Tom, the baby of the family, first. He was nineteen. He will always be nineteen now. Dan must have fallen clear of the rubble; I could have imagined he was only sleeping, except for the trickle of blood from his mouth and his eyes opened on surprise—forever twenty-two. Jerod next, his twenty-fifth birthday less than a month away. The last body was Mike's. My almost twin, only twelve months between us like a long shadow. Mike, the keeper of all my memories, the first face I recall looking back at me. Mike was thirty-one.

Now the only body left was me, thirty-two years old. The Red Cross nurse reminded me I was still living with a hand against my back. I could see our father through the window—stooped now, frail. *My boys*, he kept repeating, voice thin and high, a canary calling out and fading. *My boys*. Our mother was seventeen miles downriver, sedated in a hospital bed.

The nurse pulled me with her into this new, lesser world, walked with me toward the man with the paperwork to sign. She moved me. She moved me forward into the left-behind.

Dan

It sounds like the train curving around the tracks just past Willow Island, where it picks up speed as it leaves town behind. Feels like it too; he used to put his hands on the rails to feel them purr, then roar. When they were kids, he and his brothers lined up pennies on the thick iron and went looking for them after the train had wiped them smooth and flat. The older ones always let him have theirs after. He can still feel the weight of all those ruined pennies, hear them rattling together in his pocket.

A bolt snaps below him and the platform he's standing on starts to slide. To his right, yesterday's concrete peels away and falls in chunks toward the ground below. His brothers are on a different piece of scaffolding just ahead of him.

He closes his eyes. The train is calling in the distance. A purr now, rumble of another town, another state, an adventure just around the next corner he cannot see past. A trip he will never take because he could never bring himself to leave his brothers.

When they were kids, summer belonged to them, their hours of endless inheritance. His brothers always ahead of him. On bikes reckless around the bends of mountain roads. Running, running, whooping calls cutting the thick air as they raced to the river, t-shirts ripped off as they went, dropped on the overgrown grass. His brothers' weedy arms and bare chests in the thick heat. With the sun just down they looked like ghosts ahead of him, noisy apparitions in cut-off jeans, their bodies straining toward the future. He grew toward them, always. His hands grew to

mimic their hands, and he put them to work in the same places. His words hatched on his tongue, soft around the edges, they flew from his mouth in the same song his brothers sang, a harmony with five parts. *I'm getting out of here*, his friends said. *I'm getting out of this place*. But he stayed. His brothers singing up ahead.

A roar now, all around him. He opens his eyes to see his brothers fall.

One night, his nineteenth birthday, he'd walked down to the tracks buzzed on Rolling Rocks and the sugar from the Shop 'n Save cake his brothers had bought him. He had a penny in his pocket and he'd laid it carefully on the tracks and sat there with the night sounds and waited.

When the train came it brought with it a gust of cold air. That one bright beam of light and then darkness again, the scream of the iron and that cold wind like it would blow him away. He was drunk and he couldn't find the penny afterward, not in the dark, so he'd sat down to wait out the sunrise. His brothers had found him instead, dragged him home, laughing at him.

He wonders what happened to that penny. He wishes he'd gone back later to look for it, added it to the shoe box of misshapen coins under his bed. His platform will go any minute but it doesn't matter. His brothers are ahead of him, and he always follows his brothers.

He jumps. The train rushes to meet him. He knows now that it will not take him anywhere his brothers cannot find him. It's just another race to the river, just the ghosts of their younger bodies leading them all to the water, his brothers and himself. They will always be calling to each other, always running through these hills, half-wild and together.

His brothers. Himself.

3.

My wife looked like she'd seen a ghost when I finally went home that night. I knew the ghost was me.

My boy had lost another tooth. He wanted to tell me about it—I could see that all over his face—but he held back. The grief was sharp-edged, expanding. It threatened to gut us all. I sat at the kitchen table and could not eat my wife's tuna noodle casserole. I wet my mouth with water from the glass she set in front of me, over and over. When she started on the dishes, I held my hand out toward my boy. He approached me sideways and I could smell the gravel of the school playground on him.

I put my hand out on the table and he gave me his own, balled up, an oyster shell clutching its pearl. I unfolded his fingers slowly with one of my own, and then touched the tooth there in his damp palm. Hardened calcium, sharp phosphorus. A trace of blood clung to the root. I never could understand why my wife kept his baby teeth as they fell out, hidden in the box our weddings rings came in, a secret in the drawer with her bras and underwear.

I understand now. Death makes collectors of us all; she was just a quicker study than me. I tried a smile for my boy, and he gave it back a thousandfold. His fingers curled back in, and I let him keep his treasure.

Jerod

The sudden sinking in his stomach as the scaffold gives way reminds him of the time Ang knocked him off his barstool at the Red Moon. All the boys left in the bar had laughed then; no one's laughing now.

He'd tried it on with Ang that night and she'd not taken to it kindly. He doesn't know why he did it. In his head, paths unfold in all directions, possibilities unspool in lines like the orange yarn his mother used to knit their hunting caps. But there is no direction which ends with he and Ang together like that. He's known it since the ninth grade, when he cottoned on that they were both staring at Jessie Summers, head cheerleader, with the same impure notions.

He knows Ang doesn't want him like that. He's not sure he wants that from her, either, but he does want her—-wants *this*—the two of them shoulder to shoulder forever. And he'd watched her struggle under the weight of this place which did not understand her and would never love her like she deserved. She threw boards good as any man down at the mill where they'd worked summers. She banged up her hands with them and her strong arms bronzed just the same under the working-day's sun. And still there were conversations she could not enter without giving herself away. Rooms from which she was locked.

Now he pictures her waiting for him at the bar. He sees her so clear—big gray eyes, brown curls cropped short, the little wrinkle across her forehead when she talks. He imagines walking up behind her, sees the back of her neck bare above her collar. He wishes he'd had the guts to write her name down as his next of kin, as the recipient of his insurance policy. Because the orange threads are spinning out around him—tangling, searching—and none of them lead back to that barstool at the Red Moon. There is no direction now but down, none that end with anything but an empty place beside Ang.

Ang—Angela as only her mother called her—Ang who rambled beside him in the dry winter creek beds. Who grew up long in her limbs and awkward in her body. Ang, who always beat him at baseball and arm wrestling and any other thing that mattered. Nothing soft about her but her heart.

Maybe that was all he wanted, that night she knocked him to the floor. Some way to tell her, some ritual to seal a promise he'd never said out loud. They never spoke about the kiss again. He wanted to say her soft parts were safe with him. Were cherished.

He says it now, and hopes she hears it somehow.

Ang—

4.

The reporters swarmed. Stuck cameras in our faces, asked questions no one wanted to answer. They photographed the wrong house—ran a photo of my uncle's trailer and said it was our family's home. The family that lost four brothers. They stuck a camera in my mother's face and recorded her, swaying under sedatives and a mountain of grief.

They got what they came for and then they left. As always, we remained. OSHA came, handed out safety violations to the company we worked for. They pushed too fast—the concrete didn't have time to set before they had us pouring more. I listened and my blood burned inside me.

In the evening, after her sleeping pill, Mama unspooled her memories like someone lost in the dark. She followed fractured stories threaded through the maze—the hallway to her bedroom, the muffled edges of her mind.

I said I'd never marry a coal miner. Asking for sorrow. But he brought me flowers, beautiful bright blue flowers, and he took my hand in that far field and I thought it would be alright. Don't take the boys down there, I said. I begged him. Just don't take my boys down under the ground. I thought it'd be alright. I thought if they just stayed above ground…

My wife stopped talking. I wasn't listening, my hearing pitched much farther away. I kept an eye on my shadow; I listened for the other parts of the constellation that drew in my borders. Some nights when I lay facing away from her, watching the creep of moonlight across the wall, my wife would say my name—*Rob*—real low and quiet, and then she'd wait so still in the darkness. I feigned a sleep that never came.

One night I passed my boy's room on my way to the kitchen. It was pitched in black, but something caught my eye, made me turn and then walk through his bedroom door. He was awake, and he was standing on top of his bunk, looking down at me. The nightlight in the hallway threw an orange glow into the shadows, and I could see his eyes—glistening, bright—looking down at me.

"What are you doing?" I asked him. My hands came up in the darkness, my arms reaching for him.

He was quiet for a moment. I could hear the both of us breathing. Could feel the earth spinning. "Do you think I could fly, Daddy?"

“No, buddy.” My voice didn’t sound like my own. My fingers brushed the edge of his t-shirt, sought out solid skin. “Come on down here.”

When my boy was in my arms I remembered how small he was still. Six years old, belly still round against my chest as I hoisted him up until his head rested on my shoulder. His hair was sticking up in patches and his cheek was warm as he pressed into mine. He was in-between. Not asleep, not fully awake, all soft edges. I put him back in bed and waited til he fell asleep. I made up my mind.

The Appalachians are old, some of the oldest mountains in the world. There were whispers. I made up my mind to follow them. I made up my mind to bring my brothers home.

Mike

The first thing he thinks is *shit—not now, not like this*. He was supposed to call his daughter in Ohio when he got off his shift. He wanted to ask her how she liked the new books he’d sent her. He wanted to hear her voice when she talked about the new kid, just moved from California—he could tell she had a crush on the guy. Her first, maybe.

Then his whole body lurches violently, his head smacking against the thick bar holding him up like a barnacle on this goddamned tower, and he is eight years old again. He’s sitting on the handlebars of Rob’s bike, and they’re almost to the piece of road that drops down into the holler where their house is tucked in so snug and neat. It’s supper time. Their mother is probably out on the porch calling them, one hand shading her eyes from the sun slanting low as it dips

toward nightfall. She'll be looking for them, Rob-and-Mike, the two of them a single entity, a proper collective noun.

Rob always does all the work when they're heading for home after a day of walking the woods. He pedals them back through their realm, the country of their daytime hours and their nighttime dreams. The light drops down like coins through the filtering leaves above. They don't know they're any different from the other wild animals in their universe yet—the deer whose paths they trace through the undergrowth, the birds who call back and forth overhead, always flitting ahead and away. They don't know they're poor—their bellies get filled every morning and evening, their clothes cover their bodies, and they have each other and these tree-crowned mountains. For now, they are sovereign monarchs, wealthy beyond belief. The old bike's frame creaks under the strain of the hill and their bodies' weight. Rob pants behind him. Almost there. Almost there.

They pause at the crest. There is a golden hour and they're in it now; from here, the ripple of the mountains extends out in every direction. From their view, the mountains might as well go on and on forever.

"Hold on, Mike." Rob has caught his breath. Mike hunches lower until the handlebar is just above his knees, rests the tops of his sneakers on the old headlight that doesn't work anymore. He wraps his fingers tight around the cool metal, spotted with rust.

"Ready?" Rob asks, and Mike nods. Rob kicks them off, and then leans forward, his head pressed to Mike's left shoulder. And then, the falling away, downhill. They are flying. Faster, steeper—wind and sunlight fractured across their bodies. He is flying again now, he remembers

how it felt to live in his eight-year-old body, feels again his own weight lifting from his bones, as if he could float right up out of this moment, an astronaut freed from rules and time and gravity.

Come on now, their mother calls. She calls them home. *I'm almost there*, he says. He's flying with his brother. Rob-and-Mike. Here they come.

I'm flying to you. I'm a bird. A fractal of light. A breeze over the mountain. And I am almost home.

5.

There are rules.

Drive out the back roads, far enough that the blacktop becomes a memory and the crunch of gravel under your wheels is your only company when the radio signal fades out. The little store will appear as if from nowhere. Pull over.

Don't speak to the old man in the rocking chair out front, drumming up a slow rhythm on the boards of the sagging porch. He doesn't want your words. His beard is long and silvered, his eyes a bright, rheumy blue. It is difficult to look straight at him; your eyes will water and smart, blink and close of their own volition.

Make an offering. There's an old coffee can beside him; I dropped in a handful of Dan's train-flattened coins and my boy's bone-white tooth. The old man nodded his head toward the store's front door.

Take only what is given. Inside, shadows clumped together in rows. When I stepped closer, though, every shelf was empty except the last. On it: a single mason jar filled with clear liquid.

Leave on foot. Once you start climbing the mountain, be silent, listening. Push your bare hands down into the ground. If there are layers of dead leaves or moss, push them aside until you feel the dirt.

Wait for permission. The door is only visible when the sun sets. It paints the mountainside in an orange-gold that looks like glass when it is liquid and malleable. The mountain is not malleable. It has seen the sun sink and rise again for millions of years. The door isn't a door in the way a house has a door—it's a delicate, narrow opening in a cropping of rock that reveals itself with its shadow against the sun's flashlight fingers. You could find it during the day if you looked hard enough, or if you already knew the way, but that would be disrespectful. It would be cheating. The mountain has a voice and a preference.

Present yourself. When the seam appeared, I unscrewed the lid from the mason jar and drank. The liquor, made from a mash of corn and barley, tasted like the flicker of heat lightning far off on a summer night. When I was done the moon shone out from my insides, leaking through my pores. And then I went into the mountain.

Some rules you only learn inside the mountain. One: Love the coal under the ground but leave it there—it's the long shadow of a diamond. Two: The dead don't come back, not even when you find them inside the mountain and lead them out again, into a world waking up all gray and lilac and the softest pale pink.

I found my brothers. The bell of my body called out and they flew to me as echoes. But they didn't come back.

In the end, all I brought back was myself.

Rob

It's afternoon when I drive my truck up the driveway, when I come home. My boy is riding his bike in circles around the big concrete pad in front of the house. He's almost ready to take the training wheels off. I cut the engine and watch him. He waves at me, all eager to show off his newfound balance, and I smile. There are tears in my eyes.

When I was a kid, my brothers and I would buy those brown bottles of root beer from the Exxon station and drink them as we made our way back from town. When all the soda was gone I'd hold the bottle up to the sun and put my eye against the dark glass. I saw the world all amber and waving. It's easier to love something when you can see it. Touch it, hold it. Talk to it.

The dead don't come back, and they never left.

My boy smells like summer when I bend down to him—good grass smell, some dirt and some salt-sweat. My breath moves his hair at the crown of his head. Tonight we'll catch some moonlight in a jar and leave it on his nightstand til morning. He will inherit a shoebox full of smooth, flat coins—a pile of unstrung constellations to put back together—and stories, threads to hang onto, to lead him true.

Going inside the mountain is like holding the dark glass up to your eye while someone takes away the sun. When you come up from the mountain with your loved ones you are riding

downhill, you are flying toward the gravity that hurts you, and the training wheels have been removed. The dead do not come back, but you can see them now. You carry them on your handlebars.

My wife is at the kitchen window. I come right up behind her and she twists to meet me; her hands drip soapy water down the back of my shirt when I find her mouth with mine. I am one of five ghosts, forever half-feral and hollering through these hills, but I make myself solid for her.

I am falling but the landing's a long way off.

The Dead

Pleasants Power Station—Willow Island, West Virginia

April 27, 1978

Joseph V. Bafile, Washington, Pa.

James B. Blouir, St. Marys

Robert W. Blouir, St. Marys

Steve D. Blouir, St. Marys

Kenneth E. Boring, Salem

Richard L. Bowser, Parkersburg

Thomas E. Cross, St. Marys

William R. Cunningham, Parkersburg

Roy F. Deem, Waverly

Ray Deulley, Glenville

Darryl Glover, Moundsville

Loren K. Glover, Moundsville

Alvin W. Goff, Tuppers Plains, Ohio

Gary L. Gossett, Walker

James A. Harrison, Parkersburg

Claude J. Hendrickson, St. Marys

Daniel R. Hensler, Newport, Ohio

Kenneth W. Hill, Midland, Pa.

Roger K. Hunt, Parkersburg

Tom G. Kaptis, Cairo

C. Randy Lowther, St. Marys

Ronald Lee Mathers, Walker

Howard R. McBrayer Jr., St. Marys

Willard H. McCown, Pennsboro

Clayton P. Monroe, Parkersburg

Robert B. Moore, Flatwoods

Chet Payne, St. Marys

Edgar A. Phillips, Marietta, Ohio

Raymond W. Poling, Thornton

Robert C. Riley, Parkersburg

Ray R. Rollyson, Pennsboro

Floyd Rupe, Dexter, Ohio

Alan W. Sampson, Parkersburg

Glen E. Satterfield, St. Marys

Jeffry F. Snyder, Vienna

Earnest Steele, St. Marys

Emmett R. Steele, St. Marys

Larry G. Steele, St. Marys

Miles E. Steele, St. Marys

Ronald D. Steele, St. Marys

Richard A. Stoke, Waverly

Richard P. Swick, Beverly, Ohio

Brian H. Taylor, St. Marys

Dale Martin Wagoner, Belington

Charles Warren, Parkersburg

Jackie R. Westfall, Newport, Ohio

Lewis D. Wildman, Stouts Mills

Ronald W. Yocum, Parkersburg

Gary Hinkle, Parkersburg

Larry Deem, Parkersburg

Fred Pride, St. Marys

and also with you

"Remember, next weekend we switch over to the new mass," the priest says. "There will be instructional cards with the new responses. No one panic."

Hannah wonders if there is a special class in how to talk like a priest, a primer in the careful modulation of tone and fair distribution of syllables. A few feet down the pew, her grandmother sighs, a noisy exhalation that carries in the concentrated hush of the nave.

"I don't understand this." Her grandmother's voice is discordant.

"Mom," Hannah's father whispers, "It's fine. We'll talk about this later."

"I'm seventy-nine years old," she says. "I don't want to change it, and stop talking down to me."

On the other side of their parents, her sister twitches. Hannah can see Sarah's shoulders shaking slightly, her face turned down, hidden. Their mother stares straight ahead, toward the altar where the large crucifix hangs centered above them all, Jesus dripping blood down his wrists and ankles, eyes pointed toward eternity.

After mass, and the endless shaking of hands and small talk, they get her grandmother settled into her old blue Taurus. Gran doesn't drive anymore. Hannah can remember quite vividly the last time Gran drove her somewhere, sitting on top of three JC Penny's catalogs just to see over the wheel; they seemed to slip along the back streets of town on the assumption that anyone

and everything would just move out of the way. Not long after that, Hannah's father took the keys away.

Their father turns to Hannah and Sarah. "We'll meet you guys at Gran's," he says. "Your mother and I are going to pick up dinner on the way." He hesitates, then holds the keys out to Sarah.

Sarah turns away, back toward their dad's Ford pick-up. "I'm going with you guys," she says. "Hannah can drive since she loves playing with other people's things so much." She climbs into the cab behind their mother and slams the door shut.

Their father sighs, and looks at Hannah, who crosses her arms across her chest. She stares back at him, willing him to say something. Anything. She can't untangle the hard knot under her rib cage, isn't sure what she wants him to say—to reassure, to condemn. Anything but the careful silence.

"Hannah," he says. "Please."

From behind them, her grandmother fumbles with the knob that controls her window. "What are we waiting for? It's hot in here."

Hannah unfolds and takes the keys. Her grandmother's Estee Lauder perfume fills the humid interior of the car, and the engine turns over twice before it roars to life. She backs out and turns toward the highway; as she peels out of the parking lot she catches a glimpse of her father in the rearview mirror. He's still leaning against the truck, watching her drive away.

On the highway, she leaves the radio off even though she's always hated silence when she drives. Her grandmother is humming strains of melody from the recessional hymn. Hannah watches the white line unfurl along the edge of the road and the telephone poles flash by. They

remind her of the life-sized crosses in front of their church. When Hannah was small, she would pluck at Gran's shirt during the homily until Gran looked down at her and smiled. There were always hard caramel candies in Gran's purse for this particular occasion. Now, Hannah only goes to mass every Saturday night for Gran. That chapter of her life is swiftly closing. She glances over at Gran's hands folded over the straps of her handbag—the swollen knots of her knuckles and the thin skin stretched over purple-green veins. Summer was almost over, draining slow and damp toward Autumn, when she had to make a choice. Leave or stay.

"Wanna stop for a sundae?" she asks, and Gran turns her face toward Hannah like a flower toward the sun.

"Your father will say we spoiled our dinner."

Hannah smiles, a mirror image of the mouth across from her. "Who said we were going to tell him?"

After dinner, her father corners her in the kitchen where she's filling up Gran's glass of water. She can see her mother and Sarah through the window over the sink, already climbing into the cab of the truck.

"Registration is next week," her father says, his hands pushed deep into his pockets. "Your dorm assignment came in the mail."

She rips a paper towel off the roll and wipes up the drips of water down the sides of the glass. She opens the freezer side of the fridge and adds some ice cubes.

“Hannah,” her father says as the door closes. The kitchen is falling into shadow, the late summer sun leaving them all behind. “Hannah, this was always going to be temporary. You can’t stay here with Gran forever.”

“She doesn’t want to leave. This is her *home*.”

“CareHaven will be good for her—the care she needs, plus other people to socialize with.”

Hannah scoffs. “Other people. But not *her* people. It should be us.”

Her father sighs and rubs his forehead. “Please don’t make this harder, Hannah. You gave her one more summer in this house, but now it’s time. You’re leaving, and Gran is going to CareHaven. You’ve got a chance now to get out of here. Take it.”

She holds out the lighter, and her grandmother draws a deep puff on her cigarette. Her lipstick leaves a mauve shadow on the end of the filter as she exhales. Crickets are starting to sing in the bushes. Underneath the smoke, the living room is warm and dark and clean-smelling like talcum. Soon her grandmother will turn the television on to Animal Planet, the volume too high, and doze in her armchair until Hannah comes back somewhere on the other side of midnight and switches it off.

“I need to prune those lilacs,” Gran says. “Or we won’t get any blooms next year.”

“I’ll do it. Tomorrow, ok?” Next year, someone else will likely be looking at the purple lilacs rising out of their deep green dress.

“Gran, did you ever want to move away? When you were my age, maybe—did you think about leaving West Virginia?”

“No,” says Gran. “Everybody wants that now, but I never considered it. This place has given me everything I need.”

When the cigarette’s gone, she fills up Gran’s water glass again and gives her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I’ll see you later,” she says.

“Just leave the lighter here, sweetie.”

“You know I can’t do that. Dad would kill both of us. You’re going to fall asleep, and if you have a cigarette lit you might burn yourself.”

“I’ve lived alone for thirty years.” Her grandmother’s voice goes thinner, querulous. She looks so small sitting there in her armchair, arguing like a child with her own granddaughter. Her hands used to braid Hannah’s hair when she was little— tightly woven, starting at the temples, intricate and sturdy. And now those hands cannot be trusted.

“I’m sorry,” Hannah says.

Jason is out in the garage, knocking dried mud off his baseball cleats. He looks up when Hannah steps into the light, and smiles.

“Hey.” He pulls a stool out from the workbench behind him and pats the seat. She climbs up and watches him. Jason’s silences always feel easy, like they’re asking nothing from her. He gives the shoes a quick rinse under the hose outside, then brings them dripping back into the

garage. Somewhere in the neighborhood behind them, the sharp snap and fizz of some kids' leftovers from the Fourth disturbs the quiet.

"There's a party at Fred's after the game on Friday." He wipes his hands on a frayed red rag—they leave a smear of mud behind. "Out Bull's Run. You wanna go?"

"Sure," she says, automatic. Hannah has been saying yes to everything Jason proposes for months now, even things she doesn't actually enjoy—like parties with his redneck friends. She will drink a Bud Light that tastes like barely-chilled piss and smile and pretend she's having fun. It's so easy to say yes—Hannah has found that to be the biggest surprise of all. When Jason came by the house early last spring, she'd assumed he was there to ask after Sarah—for her new phone number, or her address at the university. Eight months wasn't so long to be broken up, and she didn't blame him one bit for missing Sarah—she missed Sarah so much it felt like an amputation. Like Sarah's absence was a hole she kept falling through. But instead he asked Hannah if she'd help him study for his pipe-fitters exam coming up, and she hadn't seen any reason to say no.

"Sarah always said you were the smartest thing in town," Jason told her. She'd watched him turn over her homemade flashcards in his hands, front to back and around again, and when his hands had reached for her a few weeks later—his fingers trailing down the side of her face and underneath her chin—she didn't say no. Why hadn't she said no?

"This'll keep," Jason says now, leaning his body into hers. His mouth presses against the side of her neck. "Come on in the house."

Later, when the moonlight is spilling over their bodies in bars from the window blinds, she thinks about the mass earlier. She only started going again after she moved in with Gran, but the motions came back to her immediately, a habit and a memorization engrained down to her bones.

The lord be with you says the priest every Sunday. There is a rhythm, a tune that everyone gathered has learned to carry. They carry it together; the priest calls to them and they answer.

And also with you says the congregation. In the Cry Room, infants call out with thin wails to their mother across a still-new separation. A body—two bodies now, her body and their body—a rend. They want an answer. The congregation responds *And also with you*.

And also, the opposite of an end, the calling out never over, the crying never done. *And also*. Who am I without you? Who am I outside this place?

On Sunday mornings, Hannah and her grandmother eat glazed donuts from the grocery store down the street. Gran has coffee with hers; Hannah has orange juice. The sunlight hits the same white lace curtains in the kitchen nook that have been hanging there as long as Hannah can remember. She spent a lot of time here growing up; Sarah had sleepovers at friends' houses most weekends, but Hannah went to Gran's. She felt more comfortable in the company of old ladies than her peers—warm evenings on the side porch, rocking in the old metal glider with Gran, who had a nightly ritual of gossip with her neighbor, June. Gran would let her put on old records no one had touched for decades, and they set up TV tray tables in the living room and played gin rummy. When Hannah visited her new campus in the spring, there was a party in the quad by the

dorms. Everyone had seemed young and breezy and cool, their accents crisp and sharp like no one sounded back home. Hannah practices in the mirror sometimes now—she enunciates all her syllables and hits all the consonants. She looks strange to herself, reflected back.

As Hannah puts their dishes in the sink, Gran makes her slow climb up the stairs to have her bath. When she hears the water running, Hannah goes to the bedroom to gather up clothes that need washing. She picks up the little hamper and turns to leave, then spots Gran's blue-flowered dressing gown in the corner, rolled up into a messy ball. She picks it up and shakes it out, and as she holds it up she can see the black-rimmed holes where it stretched across her grandmother's lap—scorches from a burning cigarette. Hannah's heart swoops suddenly into her stomach. She thought Gran had given her all the lighters in the house. She thought Gran understood that it was all to keep her safe. For a moment, Hannah feels hot with anger and frustration, then vaguely ashamed of both feelings.

Hannah sets the laundry down and opens all the drawers in the kitchen, rummaging around and finding nothing. She checks the little closet in the hallway, feeling behind the towels and extra toilet paper, then takes the lid off the jewelry box on Gran's dresser and there it is—a cherry red lighter. She slips it into her pocket and replaces the lid.

On the bottom stair, she sits and listens as the bath water starts to drain upstairs. The pipes in the house are old, and they groan and gurgle inside the walls. When her grandmother makes her way slowly down the stairs again, she smells of powder and lilac soap, and Hannah says nothing.

When Hannah was five and Sarah was seven they both got Etch-a-Sketches in their Christmas stockings. Hannah was desperate to understand how they worked—what unseen hand drew those thin, tremulous lines through the shifting, drifting void—and so after lunch she took Sarah's out to the garage and broke it open with a garden shovel. When Sarah caught her hunched over what was left of it, saw the handfuls of aluminum dust and the thin nylon strings pooling over the concrete floor—*Sarah* spelled out in glittery stickers on the red plastic frame—her rage was wordless and swift.

Hannah thinks now about the clean arc of the shovel through the air as Sarah aimed it at her head, about the yelling and the crying after. Sarah crept into her bedroom that night, after their parents had put them to bed, and held a flashlight with one hand against Hannah's shoulder as they each turned one of the knobs on what had been Hannah's Etch-a-Sketch, but was now Sarah's. She thinks about Sarah's cheek pressed against the edges of the band-aid on her jaw and the sound of their breathing in the darkness.

During the week, Hannah works at the city pool—long, bright afternoons watching all the people in the water for signs of drowning. It's hot on top of the lifeguard stand. It feels closer to the sun than the six feet above everyone else should warrant, and open, as if there was a giant, flaming eye pressed to a magnifying glass centered over her. The backs of her thighs are damp and sticking to the molded plastic of the chair and there is sweat beading together on her hairline. She squints into the light. Every blink leaves her with an impression on the back of her eyes, a flashbulb haze.

There's a boy in red swimming trunks twisting in circles in the shallow end. "Marco," he says, hands pressed to his eyes. He has a pair of neon green goggles pushed up on his forehead.

"Polo," calls back his older brother. He's wearing black trunks with grinning skulls all over them, his body is stuck somewhere between the old pudge of childhood and the painful leanness of the always hungry, newly teenaged boy.

She turns her gaze toward the deep end, crowned on its edge with two diving boards. A group of college girls back for the summer has fanned out a handful of deck chairs behind them. They're laughing, rubbing suntan lotion on shoulders and backs, their bikini tops bright blues and pinks and lipstick red. Hannah blinks; the world is white around the edges before it comes back into focus.

"Marco," calls the boy.

"Polo," says his brother, backward. His hand is on the floating rope that separates where toes can touch and where the pool falls off into the deep.

Hannah closes her eyes again for five seconds, counts each one in the red splash of her closed eyelids. When she opens them, one of the girls has climbed a diving board.

"Marco."

The older brother is in the deep end now, one hand on the concrete side of the pool, watching the girl on the board shake out her long brown hair with her fingers.

"Marco," says the boy again. He's drifted closer to the side the lifeguard stand is on, and Hannah can see the tense white of his knuckles pressing against his face.

The girl walks slowly to the edge of the diving board and turns her face up to the sun for a moment. Her friends are leaning toward each other in the background, laughing and passing

around a bag of potato chips. The girl above the water is alone, an insulated flare of tanned skin and turquoise breasts, the brother watching, silent.

"Marco!" The edge of panic, a note of rising aloneness.

I'm here, Hannah thinks. The girl erupts in a sudden surge of color and motion, slips into the mirror-topped water with a silver splash.

"Marco," calls the small boy, but his brother is still watching the girl, swimming now in a cloud of hair and limbs under the water.

I'm still here.

The pale, purple hour after the sun has gone down but before it's truly dark has always been Hannah's favorite; like overexposed film, the mundane colors of everything she knows in the daylight fizz out, transform, take on new qualities. Here at Gran's, it's time for a cigarette, supervised.

Hannah holds the plastic green and white box of Virginia Slims and the lighter as Gran inhales sharply and the cigarette end flares orange. The tobacco burns, and the menthol scent joins it to mingle in the room. Gran looks out the window, where the leaves on her big lilac bushes are turning powdery in the damp, late heat—a mildew that shows up only during the most humid summers.

"I should take some lilacs over to June," Gran says.

June has been dead for years now. "Gran—".

"Hmm? What did you say, Sarah?"

Hannah looks at Gran's face, lined and delicate-looking, more open than she can remember it ever being. Watching her grandmother, granting or withholding requests—it strikes her as unbearably cruel, this reversion at the end of a life. She hopes there is an element of comfort to be picked out, too, like rescuing the best blooms from a failing plant.

"Nevermind, Gran," says Hannah. She watches as her grandmother smokes, and then nods off to the sound of her television program, and she carefully pulls the still-burning stub of cigarette from Gran's fingers and puts it out in the ashtray.

The section of stands behind the visitors' side dugout at the city baseball field is poorly-lit and rarely occupied. Hannah climbs quietly to the very top and sits in the farthest corner, where she's sure no one will notice her. She doesn't come here for Jason's team, and he's never demanded an explanation. But on Wednesday evenings there are no games or practices booked, and Sarah meets her friends from high school for pick-up softball games.

The ball and Sarah's bat collide with a sharp cracking sound, and Hannah watches the small white dot sail off into the outfield. Sarah watches it, too—the bat trailing in the dirt beside her now, one hand up to shield her eyes from the glare of the floodlights as she follows the ball's course. One of Sarah's friends whoops and Sarah shrugs, then signals the pitcher to throw another ball. They've finished their game, and now they're just practicing.

Sarah plays for the university's softball team, but Hannah stopped traveling with her mom for the games after Sarah found out about Jason. After Sarah stopped talking to her.

Another pitch, another hit—this time farther. Sarah's shoulders are straight and even, her face open and ready for anything. Sarah is sharp and bright and loud; she trails laughter behind her like a hero's cape. Hannah watches, and misses her, and marvels at how Sarah is always perfectly, easily herself.

On Friday night Hannah is putting on mascara when she hears her dad, voice raised, downstairs. When Hannah walks in, Gran is leaning against the counter, right beside the stove, and there are twisted ropes of torn-up paper towels lying there, singed on the ends.

"Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?" her father is saying. "Lighting paper with an electric burner? You could set the whole house on fire!"

"You won't leave me a lighter," Gran mutters.

"You can't have a lighter because you're going to burn yourself up in that chair! Do you even care? Hannah could get hurt, you know!"

Her grandmother finally looks away from the window. She looks overwhelmed, suddenly, attacked on all sides and confused.

"It was my fault," Hannah blurts out. "I was getting ready and forgot to come sit with her for her cigarette." She pulls the lighter out of her back pocket and holds it up. "Come on, Gran. I'll get you started."

When Hannah comes back to the kitchen, her father is still standing there, looking at the blackened remnants on the stove. "Next week Gran is transitioning to CareHaven, and we're taking you to Move-In Day," he says.

“No.”

Her father looks at her finally. His shirt is rumpled and coming untucked from his pants. He looks very, very tired. Older than she pictures him in her head, when he isn’t right there in front of her.

“What are you doing, Hannah? This opportunity is special—you’ve been working for it so hard, for years. There’s nothing like that here for you. And these choices you’re making—do you really think this is who you are?”

She’s been waiting for months for him to say something to her about Jason, but somehow she’s still stung, caught off guard. “What about you?” she asks. “What about your choice to put Gran in a home? Is that who you are?”

Her dad’s mouth tightens, turning down in the corners, but it doesn’t feel like she’s scored a point. It doesn’t feel like winning.

“I have to go,” she says. She cannot get out of this house fast enough—out the back door, across the alley behind the house, down the street toward where Jason lives. She can’t walk fast enough for her own limbs or far enough to leave herself behind.

Sometimes Hannah feels like there are multiple versions of herself. There’s the Hannah that loves the crawl of complex equations across a page, and the Hannah that sits in the passenger seat of Jason’s car and accepts the spillover of feelings he had for someone else. For Sarah, her sister. There’s the Hannah who loves Sarah so fiercely and the Hannah who started sleeping with her ex-boyfriend while she was away. This Hannah with one person and a different

Hannah with the next. Hannah talking hillbilly—stretching out inside certain words, dropping off their hard edges—and Hannah smartening up, training the hill-sound out of herself alone in the bathroom. And every day in this house, with her grandmother traveling further down the road that is *away*, she feels the Hannah that danced to big band albums and ate club sandwiches with Gran's bridge club slipping away, too. When Gran no longer remembers that Hannah, where will she be? Gone, like she never existed?

It's easy to see, suddenly—too easy to understand—how the best parts of a person might slip away, when they're no longer shared with someone else.

The music at the party is loud, and particularly shitty tonight. Someone bumps into her from behind and beer spills out of her plastic cup; it runs down her arm and turns her hand sticky. She takes another swig, finishes it, and hands if off to Jason, who pulls her toward the garage, where the kegs are kept.

The space is crowded with people, most of whom she doesn't know. Hannah imagines herself folding up into her own skin, smaller and smaller, until she could slip through the cracks of everyone and escape outside. Jason slips his hand up the back of her shirt, stops right below the band of her bra. Her skin is sweat-slick and his hand is too warm. She doesn't shrug him off.

She drinks the refill he hands her while he talk-yells at one of the guys on his city league baseball team. She looks up toward the ceiling and imagines herself somewhere else. There is a moth beating its wings against the light bulb above them.

"You game?" Jason is talking to her.

"What?"

He laughs and his hand slips higher, curves around over her ribcage. "C'mon, we're gonna go swim in the creek."

Hannah doesn't want to swim in the creek, but she does want to get out of this garage, so she lets Jason pull her through the mass of people and she breathes in deep when they reach the cooler air outside. Jason's buddies are already pulling off their shirts as they near the bank where the grass gives way to flat rocks and the water that makes its way down off the mountain. Hannah leans back, creates some drag on Jason's hand pulling hers. He looks back at her.

"Hurry up. Don't you wanna cool off?"

Hannah shakes her head. "I don't really want to go in. I'll watch from here."

"No, no, no," Jason says, still pulling at her, his voice sly and warm, sure of winning her over. It's been working for him all summer.

"I don't want to," Hannah says clearly.

Jason drops her hand and turns to face her fully. "Oh c'mon, Sarah, loosen up."

Hannah looks at him. His hair curling up from under the baseball cap. The line of stubble along his jaw that he missed while shaving. His arms are loose and animated—he's drunk. He's drunk and it's dark and the edges of things tend to blur along these seams.

"Hannah," she says. "I'm Hannah."

Jason takes off his hat and runs his hands through his hair. "Shit," he says, and puts the hat back on, straightening the bill. "I know that. Just a slip of the tongue. No big deal, right?"

Is it? Hannah wonders, suddenly, how much of herself she might be persuaded to let slip away.

“I think I’m done,” she says. She turns and puts her back to him, crosses the yard toward the road which meanders its way down and around the mountain and back toward town.

“Hey,” says Jason behind her. He catches up and and reaches for her hand. “Hey, what are you doing? There’s no sense in this. Talk to me.”

Hannah pulls her hand out of his. “No.”

“Hannah, come on, now.” This time his hand curls around her arm.

She turns back and she looks at his hand on her body. She looks hard at his fingers pressing pale circles into her skin and then she looks up into his face until he drops his hand and steps back. He stares at her.

“I said no,” she tells him.

His lip curls and his face settles into ugly lines; she’s never seen this Jason, but she thinks part of her knew it was there, had known it all along. He laughs—a short, sharp sound.

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I told you.” She turns away again and starts walking. “Hannah.”

The party was farther out than she’d thought. She’s been walking for ages, no bars on her cell phone, the road winding and curling on and on. She kicks at some gravel on the shoulder and it skitters out into the darkness. She can hear herself breathing—it sounds harsh and uneven against the sound of the frogs calling out to each other in the ditch. The night feels vast and indifferent.

Marco, she thinks, as she picks her way over a drainage channel lined with cattle bars. *Marco*, as she swats a mosquito off her bare leg.

Ahead of her, twin beams of light appear, flit in and out of sight as the vehicle moves through the curves. As it gets closer, she moves away from the blacktop, off the shoulder and into the tall weeds. A truck roars past her, then slows. She can hear it go off the road and when she looks, it's reversing and then turning back to drive toward her. She clutches the useless cell phone and debates running into the woods, and then she sees the particular blue of the hood and its familiar shape. The dent in the fender from where her dad hit a deer three autumns ago.

The truck pulls up beside her. The passenger window is open.

"What the fuck?" says Sarah from the driver's seat. "Are you dumb or something? Don't answer that. Just get in."

Hannah stares at her. "Why?"

"Cause you're still six miles from town, genius, and you're not exactly the athletic type."

Hannah opens the passenger door and climbs up into the cab. They start back to town in silence. It's dark in the truck except for the low glow of the displays on the dash. The local 80s station is playing very quietly from the radio.

"How did you know to come get me?"

"A friend called. Said you had a fight with Jason and stormed off."

Hannah stares out the window.

"He do something?" Sarah asks. "Did he—"

"No," Hannah says. "I mean, not really. He called me by your name, but I've been wanting an excuse for months now. I don't know why I started with him in the first place. Sarah, I'm sorry. I know he was—"

"I don't give a shit about Jason," Sarah interrupts. "He's not the issue. I just cannot understand for the life of me why you'd do it."

"I don't know." Hannah sounds small and miserable, which is also how she feels. "Everything is so messed up now. You were gone and I was still here and Gran was—"

Sarah is quiet for awhile, then she says, "You're not really giving up a full scholarship, are you? You've wanted a spot in that Engineering program for years. You're not going to waste that, right?"

"No. I don't know. I don't fit in there."

"What do you mean?"

"I sound wrong. I act wrong."

Sarah scoffs. "You sound fine. There's nothing wrong with the way you talk. Fuck 'em."

"What about Gran?"

"What about you? Gran has lived her life for seventy-nine years, and she wouldn't want you staying here to pass out cigarettes and drive her to church."

Hannah leans her forehead against her arm and lets the night air hit her face. It feels a little like flying. "Do you remember when we went to mass with her every weekend? When we believed that stuff, too, like she does?"

"Yeah," Sarah says. Her voice is quieter now. "But it's just a routine. It's just a set of lines and wanting someone to yell back at you."

Hannah thinks about Gran kneeling on the padded hassock every weekend. About the way the patina on her rosary beads is worn away, and about the small run in her stocking, right across her ankle, that she'd noticed last Saturday. She thinks about Gran forgetting her name, and her face, and finally, her very self.

"There's no one yelling back, Sarah," she whispers. "There's nothing on the other end."

Sarah turns off her brights as another vehicle sweeps around toward them and slows down, then flicks them back on and hits the gas when they're past. "Yeah, well—that's why we yell at each other."

Hannah laughs, and Sarah doesn't say a word about how cracked and damp it sounds, and together they wind their way back toward home.

Gran wakes up as Hannah and Sarah come into the house. After Hannah gives her a cigarette, they get out the TV tray tables and Gran produces a deck of cards. Sarah keeps leaning across the sofa, elbows in Hannah's lap, snatching up cards as she and Gran lay them down.

"Ace of Hearts?" asks Sarah.

"Go fish," answers Hannah. And they go on and on that way, laughing at Sarah's ridiculously full hand, teasing Gran about her poker face. The lamplight glows warm and gentle on their faces and their words stretch out, warm and slow, a music batted back and forth between them. This is it—this is what Hannah's been missing. What she's chased across ill-advised evenings with Jason in his darkened bedroom and why she's been digging her heels in here—

what if she never finds it again? What if she never belongs anywhere like she belongs right here? This communion. This place where every call made receives an answer.

“I wish it could be like this forever,” Hannah says. “I wish we could do this every night.”

Gran says, “If we did it every night it wouldn’t be special.”

“I think it would.” Even as she says it, Hannah feels the words turn slippery on her tongue. Both true and not-true—it’s only now, so close to gone she’s already looking back, that Hannah knows what to miss. She watches as Gran goes out, all her cards down and lined up in runs and sets. Sarah swears and starts counting up the cards left in her hand. Gran smiles and holds her hands out in front of her, palms up, like on a statue of Jesus pointed at the void. Gran is always looking at them, though. She taps out another cigarette and holds it out to Hannah to light.

“One more round,” Gran says.

“The lord be with you both.” Sarah pulls on her game face as she shuffles the deck.

Hannah loves the person she is right here, right now. She resolves to carry this Hannah with her, no matter how heavy she might become, how strange and out of place. The words come easy. There’s a rhythm to the call-and-response of living, to the work and the reward of loving everything that is fleeting and finite—which is everything that matters.

“And also with you.”

Alarum

"But if you are a sentient being reading this article in 2016, you already have PFOA in your blood. It is in your parents' blood, your children's blood, your lover's blood. How did it get there? Through the air, through your diet, through your use of nonstick cookware, through your umbilical cord. Or you might have drunk tainted water…The drinking water in Parkersburg itself, whose water district was not included in the original class-action suit and has failed to compel DuPont to pay for a filtration system, is currently tainted with high levels of PFOA. Most residents appear not to know this.

Where scientists have tested for the presence of PFOA in the world, they have found it. PFOA is in the blood or vital organs of Atlantic salmon, swordfish, striped mullet, gray seals, common cormorants, Alaskan polar bears, brown pelicans, sea turtles, sea eagles, Midwestern bald eagles, California sea lions and Laysan albatrosses on Sand Island, a wildlife refuge on Midway Atoll, in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean, about halfway between North America and Asia."

—Nathaniel Rich, "The Lawyer Who Became DuPont's Worst Nightmare," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2016

The car sounds a faint, repeated ding as she walks away from it, warning her of the door left open like a broken wing, insides exposed. She's moving through the tall weeds just beyond the highway's gravel shoulder—Shepherd's Purse and Queen Anne's lace. Underneath their flowering cover lie tossed-away plastic cups and ragged ropes of yellowed plastic. The throw-away, the detritus, the out of sight and out of mind.

The crates are maybe fifty yards off the highway. As she moves closer, the weeds fall away to mowed grass and each step is easier. Each step is more urgent. A dog barks somewhere behind the big barn farther on, near where she imagines the house to be. Soon someone will spot her, soon men will come and ask her what she thinks she's doing. She presses on, faster now.

She sinks to her knees in front of the first crate. There is a tiny patch of dirt-scrubbed grass in front, fenced in by a low metal half-circle, and she curls her fingers into the empty squares of the wire. Inside the heavy white plastic, a calf looks back out at her. Black and white splotched, velvet, knobbed knees sticking out where its legs are folded underneath its body. There is feces in the pen outside, and the smell of urine throughout, and underneath all that the soft, sweet hay and dirt smell of cow bodies. The calf doesn't move except to twitch its furred ears away from a fly. It watches her as if wondering what she will do.

She wonders that, too. So often lately, her own actions mystify her, a surprise uncovered after the fact.

The dog is louder now; its throaty cry drowns out the car's whine behind her. She'd been driving along, thinking deliberately about nothing much at all, radio off and just the sound of her

tires on the highway, the gasoline-edged air pushing through her open windows on her way to the Walmart. They were out of milk. The boys had been upset that morning, eating their dry cereal before the bus arrived. The surgeon's office had called when her consult appointment time came and passed without her presence; she let it go to voicemail. Tonight, Keith will ask her how it went and she will disappoint him. She tried to care this morning, standing in front of the bathroom mirror. Looking at the thick pink furrows of scar across her chest. Her chest, flat now, strip-mined. She tried to care for Keith's disappointment but could only dredge up contempt.

Men's voices, closer now. The calf only looks at her; it doesn't know what the plastic pen means. Doesn't know where its mother is, what it is to be mothered at all. She is breathing too fast and her throat feels tight. This world feels unbearable. Her body leaks salt water and poison every day. She doesn't feel like a woman anymore, but like a bruise.

The calf is still watching her, all soft eyes and ugly, ignored want. Maryann can feel her own heartbeat in the pads of her fingertips—pulse, peal, persistent wave of a siren—and she lets her body have its say.

The first warning came from the cows. It's hard for Maryann to think about, even now—the red bubbles across soft fur, nostrils flared and streaming. The eyes. That's what wakes her up still, in the dead part of the night, like a fish hook pulling slowly up through her guts—the eyes wide but unseeing, fixed on nothing as the body lunged forward. A spreading white panic.

About a week earlier they noticed a strange, foamy buildup at the wide curve of the

creek's elbow, where the water turned slow and took its time. It looked like the creek had taken up cloud manufacturing, and she'd imagined it rising into the sky when it got to a certain size, drifting further and further away, until their farm was indistinguishable from everything else around it. Maryann had been on an airplane only twice in her life, from Columbus to Vegas and then back again, when she and Keith got married. Looking down at the land from above—at the collection of patches in varying greens and browns like a quilt—had done something to her head. Some people, she knew, got a thrill from being high above everything. All it did was make her feel small back then.

"Strange," Keith said. But there were chores to be done, and the kids had t-ball that night, and they almost forgot about the bizarre not-cloud that appeared and faded in the creek bed.

Until Flossie.

The calf sprawls awkwardly across the car's backseat, strange against the faded microfiber discolored by years of the boys leaving crumbs and soda stains in their wake. His animal smell fills up the vehicle, and Maryann breathes easier. The day presses in on them with its hot breath and bright stripes of sunlight.

The Walmart parking lot is lightly occupied when Maryann arrives, but she pulls the car up to the curb in front of the Garden Center anyway. She leans through one of the open back windows and strokes gently over the calf's forehead and down behind its ears, which twitch and relax again under the gentle touch of her fingers. Perhaps the biggest surprise of all has been how

closely rage and tenderness are entwined in the body. Two roots tangling together under the soil, feeding the same plant. Back of the hand, the open palm.

In the store, Maryann fills her cart with discounted throws—soft velours in bright colors and faux sheep fur. She buys a dog brush and a bulk package of Clorox wipes. On her way to check out she passes an end-cap with bright red and blue pool noodles, so she grabs one of each. She selects a gallon of two percent milk.

As she waits to put her items on the conveyor belt, she looks up from a brightly busy magazine cover to catch Carla Meeks staring at her from the next line over. Carla looks away. Maryann can see the pink flush creeping up Carla's neck, which means she's embarrassed. Good. Carla should be embarrassed—ashamed, more like. A decade of friendship, of their kids on the same Little League teams and potluck dinners on the weekends, and then silence. When Maryann and Keith sued DuPont, suddenly Carla wouldn't answer her calls. She pretended not to see Maryann at school pick-ups, she turned her back when Maryann entered the same room.

Carla's husband, like so many in Parkersburg, works for DuPont.

Maryann counts out three twenty-dollar bills when it's her turn, and the cashier hands her back a five, two quarters and a couple pennies, two plastic bags, and the tall, thin pool noodles, which defy containment. She looks at Carla as she leaves. Makes sure their eyes meet.

There's a man in a Walmart vest standing by her car when she comes back out, but she ignores him. Trunk loaded, she leaves the cart on the sidewalk and he recedes in her rearview mirror.

Flossie was her favorite; she came to the farm as a calf when Maryann was new there herself. It was about a year after the wedding, and Maryann's belly was just beginning to grow large and round with her first child. She felt softened, inside and out. Flossie had not settled easy into her life on the farm. Keith thought she'd been sold too soon; he grumbled about proper herd management until Maryann tuned him out. She sat with Flossie in the evenings, a bare bulb overhead spilling a puddle of warm light around the both of them. Flossie's fur was surprisingly soft, and her eyes so large, framed by long, thick lashes. She liked to lay her head on Maryann's lap and have her forehead stroked and her ears scratched. Maryann had never given much thought to the cows before Flossie. They were fed, they were milked, they sometimes produced more cows, and then often they were sold on for meat. Flossie seemed more like a dog than a cow, and she stayed that way—even as an adult, Flossie would run from the field to nudge her soft, pink-brown nose against Maryann and receive her petting.

Then years later, one warm night in early June—still in the soft start of summer, before the air turned wet and heavy and miserable—the kids were playing out in the yard, riding their bikes down the hill that sloped up beyond the house to the upper field. She didn't notice the sound at first, mixed as it was with the kids' whooping cries, their singing down the day in all its mundane happiness. She'd never heard a cow make a sound like that before, but Keith came out of the barn, moving quick. She wondered later if he knew it from the places he went that she never did, the knowledge of the abattoir he carried and never burdened her with—if the cows in his dreams had always made that sharp, crying sound that seemed to start somewhere deep in the gut.

Flossie was running down from the field toward the house, but her gait was off—she would move sideways and then correct herself, only to drift off course again. She stumbled once or twice. And she was making that terrible noise. Maryann was running, too, before she made any conscious decision to, Keith still behind her and the kids gone quiet in the yard. From fifty yards away, she could see the red streaming out of Flossie's soft pink nose, and then the whites of her eyes, the pupils that roamed and rolled and did not focus.

At ten yards Flossie staggered and closed the rest of the distance to the fence in an ambling shuffle. Maryann reached her and put her hands on either side of Flossie's head. The cow did not seem to see her. It was as though she was looking right through Maryann's body, as though Maryann's body no longer existed. Her breath was coming out hard, and little bubbles of blood formed on her nostrils. Just as Keith reached them, and Maryann began begging him to do something, Flossie opened her mouth, but instead of bellowing again—that awful, nightmare sound—a thick stream of red fell out. Blood on the warm brown fur, blood on the grass, blood in Maryann's palms and running between her fingers.

Afterwards, when Flossie was gone and Maryann took the kids in the house, Keith walked up through the pasture, followed the creek as it wound up beyond their property and into the piece of land his brother had sold several years ago to DuPont. It was just supposed to be a storage site. When Keith came home it was dark and his hands were shaking. The next morning he borrowed their oldest son's disposable camera, and she followed him up again until they came to a white pipe running off the hillside, right out over the creek. The water in this section was swift-moving, burbling along in a hurry, and from the pipe came a steady trickle of something

green. Small bubbles marked the place it mixed with the creek water, the water that ran down through their pastures and their farm.

The creek that ran right by their house.

The truth is Maryann doesn't miss her breasts. She's supposed to, she knows. Keith certainly seems to miss them—he's been hinting she should schedule the reconstruction. But there is something about the way her clothes fall across her body now that she likes, a freedom in not thinking about containment or modesty—not even to resist them. It simply isn't an issue now. A small thought she no longer has to think, a space she needn't fill with her time. An excess carved away. Sometimes Maryann thinks all of it—the surgeries and the chemo, the radiation and the weight gained and lost—are just part of the process, all necessary to the shift happening inside her. Her body transforming strange and feral to carry her into a new kind of living.

There's so little between her heart and the world anymore. Nothing left between her self and herself.

Maryann bought a real camera at Walmart and helped Keith take pictures of what was happening to their cows, how they suffered. A sticky red lesion on a too-skinny frame. Blackened teeth, lumps and deformities. That winter, a dead calf on the new-fallen snow, its open eye a

startling, unnatural blue. They drank and cooked with bottled water, and kept the kids out of the creek. No one—not the vet, or the sheriff, or the local lawyers—wanted to talk to them, though. DuPont was the biggest employer in town.

Maryann started to think about going to her parents' place, putting seventeen miles upriver between them and the poison seeping through their home, but she didn't go until she found the lump in her breast.

After the mastectomy, the hospital chaplain came to visit her. It was around seven in the evening, and Keith had already gone home for the night. The world outside the tall glass hospital windows was muted black, mysterious. The lights were on low and it was strangely silent. Maryann wasn't used to this much quiet.

After some smalltalk, the chaplain—a nice older man with silver hair and smile lines around his mouth—asked her how she was feeling.

"It hurts," Maryann confessed. "And I feel…strange. Like a stranger to my body."

The man nodded. "I think that's normal. Don't rush things. Feel what you feel. Remember, though: the body and the soul are separate things."

Maryann stared around the room. The other bed was empty. Something was rising inside her. It took her a moment, but she was surprised to realize it was anger.

"No," Maryann said. "My body is me. I *am* my body. It hurts. *I* hurt. Something—someone—did this. Not just to my body, but *to me*."

At home, Maryann coaxes the calf out of the backseat. She keeps her arms around his middle as he tries a few steps and wobbles in the driveway. They take it slow, and once the calf is up the porch steps Maryann goes back for the Walmart bags.

Inside, she puts the milk in the fridge and fills her biggest mixing bowl with water. She arranges all the throws into a soft nest and sits on the floor beside the calf in his new bed. He's exhausted just from his short, assisted walk, and lays his head down on the blanket that looks like a sheep but isn't. Maryann combs through his hair gently with the dog brush, working out the dried muck and dust from his fur. The calf looks at her from the corner of one eye. After awhile, the eye drifts shut.

The sun coming in through the bedroom window falls across Maryann's legs, which feel heavy and warm. Maryann leans her head back on the bed behind her. The room is still mostly filled with boxes. She hasn't worked up the energy or will to truly settle in here yet. They got rid of their farm several months ago and sold the few remaining healthy cows to a neighbor. Settlement money bought them this new house a good half hour's drive north from Parkersburg. It's one of those new pre-fab homes, dropped down in ready pieces on a little sliver of land between mountains. Fresh edges, beige paint everywhere—just a husk, really. Keith works for Home Depot now. He used to manage more than five hundred acres and a couple hundred cows; now he advises customers on the correct screws for drywall and sells them ceiling fans. He keeps referring—dogged, determined—to this new daily living as a fresh start. As if one day Maryann might wake up back in her old body. As if there aren't ghosts grazing between them now.

Maryann misses their old farm, in spite of how it all ended. Behind the fresher horror of the dying cows and the poison leaching through their bodies, she can almost touch the old, worn

sweetness of their home. The faded linoleum in the kitchen and the squiggly waves in the mirror over the fireplace. She tries to remember her own image staring back at her in that mirror—that piece of glass older than her, older than Keith's parents who passed the house on to them—and even that is blurred. Did she ever see anything clear back then?

Maryann dreams now, every night. Maybe she dreamed before, too, but she'd never been someone who remembered them the next morning.

She remembers every moment now.

In her dreams, every single thing leaves a trace in her body. Sunlight. The wind running its fingers through the trees. Discarded soda bottles. The lazy sound of a cricket in the distance and C8's sticky ghost fingerprints. A blue jay's hectic jangle of watery notes. Coal dust. The persistent pollen of early spring and some chewing gum stuck to the bottom of a sneaker. Every little thing fills her head up with the fact of it, rests its weight on her tongue.

She tastes the moon. She smells hunger.

She dreams grass, still sweet with fog, cool between her teeth. Warm body, and long slow blinks that measure out an afternoon. Sun on the dirt, dirt on her knees, and then the stars spin and twist—here, then away.

Dreaming, there is nothing between her body and herself. She takes up every atom, all her breathing bones and organs and skin. She tangles with the web beyond her body—the sunlight and the plastic, the insects and the trash. A democracy of matter. She merges. In her dreams, she has never been so happy.

Maryann stays there on the floor with the calf until it's time to pick up her boys.

They diagnosed the defective heart valve after the chemo was over. Fluid was collecting in Maryann's lungs—some nights she would wake up and think she was drowning, sinking into the wreckage of her own body. Keith pushed the doctors for a cause. They were in the middle of the class action lawsuit against DuPont.

"Sometimes the radiation for breast cancer damages the heart," the oncologist told them.

"Then the chemical is responsible." Keith sounded so cold, so angry.

"If the chemical caused the cancer, then maybe." The doctor's voice was very gentle. "I can't say one way or the other. It doesn't matter in terms of treatment."

"It matters in terms of who needs to pay," Keith said.

Pay. Such an interesting word, Maryann thought. Who is paying for what, and what is paying for whom?

The cardiac surgeon's office was on the top floor of the hospital. From the window, Maryann could see most of downtown Parkersburg, the Ohio River curling around its perimeter like the loop of a noose. Earlier, while she waited for the elevator, she watched a little girl drink from the water fountain, and she wanted to scream. She wanted to open her mouth and let the clawing, gnawing thing inside her pour out. Instead she allowed Keith to pull her hand into the bend of his arm and stepped into the elevator.

The surgeon talked about the upcoming surgery. She had an option for her new heart valve: mechanical or biological.

“There’s a trade-off either way,” the surgeon told them. “The mechanical valve lasts longer, but you’ll have to take blood-thinners the rest of your life to prevent clots, and come in to have your blood levels tested frequently. You won’t have to do that with a biological valve, but they don’t last as long and you’ll probably need to have it replaced again.”

“What do you mean by ‘biological’?” Keith’s voice always sounded strangely out of place in hospitals. He was sitting in one of the chairs facing the surgeon’s desk, one foot propped up on his knee, and he was tapping his index finger on the outer sole of his work boot.

“It would be either bovine or porcine tissue,” the surgeon explained. “Treated and prepped first, of course. They—“

“Bovine.” Maryann turned away from the window. The men were looking at her. She wished they wouldn’t. “I want bovine.”

After a beat of silence, the surgeon continued. “A fine choice. I’ve seen them work very well for several of my patients.”

He kept talking, but Maryann had trouble concentrating. Keith stared at her, silent. His fingers tap tap tapping.

There are bits of cow in almost anything you can think of. She discovers this after the procedure in which a piece of cardiovascular cow tissue is sewn over a leaky doorway of her heart. Her particular piece. Particular cow unknown.

fertilizer *emulsifiers* *motor oil*

heparin *chewing gum* *body lotions*

bookbinding glue *fabric softener* *linoleum*

ear drops *jet engine lubricants* *toilet cleaner*

agricultural chemicals *suppositories* *Bavarian cream*

waterproofing agents *marshmallows* *paint*

dental floss *ink* *contraceptive creams*

sunblock *insulin* *rubber*

bubble bath *pet food* *beauty masks*

dynamite *jelly beans & jelly babies* *shaving cream*

musical strings *hyaluronic acid* *Maryann*

She’s not even unusual.

The boys rush out of the school yard with the blaring of the final bell, backpacks bouncing as they run to the car. It’s so close to summer vacation they can taste the melting popsicles and smell the sharp chlorine sting of stretched-out, empty hours lived in swimming trunks. They let out mirrored whoops when they see the swimming bag in the back seat, and the new pool noodles.

“Surprise,” says Maryann, and savors the ache in her cheeks as she smiles. Wide and wild. Real. “Let’s go.”

On the way, her cellphone rings. She flips it open with one hand. It’s Keith.

“Maryann,” he says, and his voice has a suppressed quality to it, as if he is trying very hard to prevent some dark thing from leaking out of his body. “Why is there a calf in the bedroom?”

“Are you home already?” she asks. “I didn’t expect you til much later. There’s no dinner yet—I decided to take the boys out for a treat.”

“I don’t care about dinner, Maryann. Where did this calf come from? Why is it here?”

“It’s my calf now.” Maryann takes a deep breath—the air outside the car smells green and mellow. “And I’m his person. We’ll name him when we get home. Check his water, will you, and can you borrow some grain from Walter up the road until I can get to the feed store?”

“Maryann, what the fuck are you doing? Have you lost your damn mind? Why do you have this calf?”

Has she lost her mind? Maryann feels rather as if she’s found it, actually, and it’s opening like a peony in the springtime, all lush layers unfolding, riotous and rushed, tripping into some great unknown.

“I’ll talk to you later,” she tells Keith. “I’m busy now.”

Their first night in the house—the house bought with the settlement money from DuPont—her boys shared a bag of jelly beans she'd let them choose at the Shop 'n Save while she stocked up on basic groceries. Later on she'd gone to kiss them, desperate suddenly to feel their smooth, warm cheeks, but the corners of their mouths were sticky with the candy's remains. Sugar smears, gelatin ghosts of cows on their teeth and breath. Her heart—patched and sore—started knocking against her ribcage and she went and locked herself in the bathroom where she threw up and cried. She pressed her hand against her flattened chest. The little earthquakes of her heart rippled under her fingers. She thought about the aisles in Walmart, about all the bodies of cows rendered out in particles and traces to make the products they throw in their shopping cart.

Maryann never really understood prayer. Her family wasn't religious, and she never saw the sense in talking to someone who wasn't there. But that night words dripped out of her, on the cold tile in the bathroom, over and over she moved her lips around the soundless words.

Thank you. I'm sorry. Thank you. I'm sorry. A hundred million cows, nowhere and everywhere.

The city pool has only been open a couple of days. The new paint in the locker room still smells fresh and the floors are cleaner than she's ever seen them. The boys change quickly, wriggling their little bodies out of clothing and then in again, ever-lengthening limbs darting out

to create chaos, to pinch and pull at each other loudly. Maryann has always liked the tumble of their bodies around her. She feels a pleasure so sharp it sticks in her ribs.

She pauses in her own undressing to smooth sunscreen over their soft, winter-weak skin. The fake smell of coconut and the cloying chemical undertone fill the little stall they're sharing. She takes her time, despite their giddy impatience, and rubs the thick white cream carefully across their cheeks with her fingertips. Across their foreheads, down the bridges of their noses, into the sharp curves of their chins and above their lips—that sweet dip of the philtrum. She covers it all. They tremble and vibrate; every day they almost outgrow their own skin. Finally, with a last smell of their hair, she sets them loose and they rocket outside.

Maryann continues to change in the sudden quiet. She pulls on the bottom of her two-piece and carefully rolls her underwear up with her jeans. She folds her t-shirt and stacks it neatly on top, then lines up all their shoes.

With the top of her suit in her hands, Maryann pauses. There is a narrow sliver of mirror just beyond the privacy curtain the boys neglected to pull all the way closed when they left, and she sees herself reflected back. Her hair is just about shoulder-length now, wavier than before the chemo. Her arms are thinner, and she notices the skin around her knees looks kind of crumpled, like one of the shirts the boys left discarded on the floor. Somehow, her body is both sharper and more smudged—harder angles, looser skin. The features of her face stand out. She almost laughs. *What big ears you have*, she thinks. *What big eyes, and what a big mouth*. *What teeth*.

Slowly, Maryann lowers the slick, pink-flowered fabric clutched against her chest. It's a special order bathing top with thick straps and loose fabric to cover up her middle. A gift from her mother last week, the real trick was sewn into the cups where once her breasts would have

gone. Foam inserts, the mastectomy special. A little white lie, a play-pretend—a specific, illusory camouflage for an unclear danger.

Maryann holds the top in her hands and looks at her half-bare body in the blade of mirror. It's not that there are flat planes where her C-cups had once ranged, Maryann thinks now. Without nipples, her chest looks like a blank page, just two slightly uneven scar lines like a horizontal afterthought, and the vertical line etched above her heart. An incomplete Morse code. That morning, Maryann had sat at her kitchen table with her morning coffee and read an article in *The New York Times* she'd found in her mailbox, mailed to her from her lawyer in Ohio. A seemingly innocuous pile of folded paper.

Inside was the story about their water, their cows. The chemical in their drinking water. The fight that had brought them some settlement money and lost them all their friends. And it turns out the chemical—C8, or PFOA—is everywhere now. Everybody—every body—human and animal alike.

Everywhere. She'd thought maybe seventeen miles upriver would be good enough. Now she knows there is no good enough. There is only this: the water in the creek and the pool, the the water in their drinking glass and the blood in their bodies, and all of it haunted by a moment upstream, a lump or a leak or a terrible, heartrending bellow coming from a far pasture.

Now, here, in the public pool changing room, Maryann folds up the bathing top and puts it on top of her pile. Seventeen miles had done nothing to protect her boys; no distance ever can. Maryann thinks she knew that, deep down. Every dream has told her so, in its own slanted way. There is no *us* and *them*. There is only the mesh. For some reason, she thinks of Flossie. Of the sound Flossie made running down the hill to her.

Flossie is gone—all their cows are, and even though she stole one calf away from its miserable purpose today, there were ten more in the crates just beyond his that she left behind, and thousands more at other farms. But Maryann is still here. A monument no one wants to look at. A shriek and a warning, her body somehow both less and more now. Something different for a different world. Maryann thinks of the wind blowing down off the mountain—how it moves through the metal chimes on her new back porch and sends its flurry of notes skittering down the little valley they now call home. She thinks of a hundred million cows, crying out of sight, and nobody listening.

Maryann leaves the little changing stall and moves toward the door, the rectangle of bright light, a beacon. Here, now, her bared body is perfect for its purpose, and she is not alone; she is part of it all, and her boys, and Flossie, and the coal piled on barges floating ponderous down the Ohio River. Every piece of plastic ever made, the calf on her bedroom floor, Keith. Even Carla and even the faceless, vile little men of DuPont. When she steps outside there is a slow fizzle toward silence. Just the shrieks and splashes of very young children who have no thought or care of grown-up matters like danger and shame. No one wanted to look before—their eyes went right through her body, like it didn't exist. Now they look; Maryann has removed the polite fiction of her clothing. Like a magnet she pulls them in to listen. Her body is a warning bell, a distress code completed in motion as she walks toward the deep end where her boys are waiting with their little hands on the concrete sides. Maryann, the alarum.

She smiles down at her boys and they smile back. Unlike Keith, none of the changes in her appearance have fazed them; their gaze is the only mirror she's recognized herself in for months now. She raises her arms from her sides and jumps. The water slips over her head and for

a moment she stays there, underwater. She can see legs churning all around and the sun from a greater distance. Sounds are muted and blend together, strange and directionless. The water sings like a pulse. When she surfaces her boys are shrieking in glee, launching themselves off the pool's side and flapping through the water to hang off her arms. The world is louder than before, a crowded cacophony made sharper by her brief submersion, but Maryann thinks she understands it better, that maybe now she's beginning to see and hear it true.

From far above, this pool and everyone in it would barely register— just one small blip bleeding into the next, like that patchwork of green plots she once viewed from an airplane. Unremarkable, distinctly entangled with the world. Maryann stretches out in her body and the water takes the weight of her, bears her up. Everything, every single thing in this world leaves a trace, but so does Maryann. She claims her place in the teeming assembly of matter and wails her warning, she shakes and rattles, a perfect, pulsing alarm of despair and wild, irrational happiness.

Holler

The drop into the valley is a long one, a slow winding down a serpentine ribbon of concrete, the car clinging to the edges. On one side, the dark heft of the mountain crowds close; on the other, a sheer fall to an ancient, yawning riverbed. And all around, in the summer months, a rolling, roiling green.

They make the drive in on Friday night, in a rented car from the Pittsburgh airport. May is almost over, trailing off toward the thick heat of June, all the final cares of the school year behind them. Maren rolls down the windows as soon as they turn off Route 2 and onto Sugar Creek Road. The clean smell of the forest's breath rushes in to greet her. She swings the economy car around the curves, a bone-deep melody of twist and curl she could hum in her sleep. Edie's hand is all sharp-knuckled, clenched on the passenger door.

"I swear I've got this," Maren tells her. "I've never gone off the road, never hit anything. Not once."

Edie's smile is a little stiff, but she peels her fingers off the handle and rests her hands in her lap. "I know. I've just never been on a road like this. There aren't even guardrails."

Maren tries to imagine a life out here that includes that kind of safety net, and fails. "You get used to it."

"Your house is really far from town," Edie says. "It must have taken a long time to get to school growing up."

Maren pictures the shock of bright yellow as the school bus pulled into sight of their front porch every morning around 6:30 and the window by her seat that never quite closed. She

remembers pressing her forehead to the cool glass, the empty seats around her that filled slowly as they crawled closer and closer to town.

"First on the bus, last off," Maren tells Edie. "We're almost there."

The final half mile to the house stretches out flat and slow along the creek, marked by the paved road trailing into gravel. It's already dark and shadowed here, the few other homes they pass just suggestions of buildings in the low light. It will be the same in the morning, all blue mist and a slowly-brightening gray where the sunlight has yet to reach its fingers down between the mountains rising up on either side. Their house receives the light late and loses it early.

"My first holler," Edie says beside her. Maren watches the gap in the trees ahead and grips the steering wheel harder. Yesterday she'd picked up Edie's iPad to check the weather app, and a *New Yorker* article lurked behind the home screen. About halfway through the piece, she'd seen it: *The hollers are full of rundown, rusted trailers and some of West Virginia's poorest residents. The opioid epidemic has hit the state hard.*

The house rises ghost-like in front of the car as soon as they clear the big stand of sugar maples at the mouth of the driveway. The white paint is peeling slightly along the edges of the siding. Across the way, Maren can see the shape of her father walking toward them from the barn, familiar and expected even in the darkness.

"Am I the first black girl you've brought home or just the first girlfriend?" Edie is watching the house.

"You're both," Maren rests her palm against the warm, bare skin of Edie's thigh as she puts the car in park. "They'll love you."

"How do you know?"

Maren smiles, even though Edie isn't looking and probably couldn't see it even if she was. "Because you're you."

The front door opens in a burst of orange and reveals the outline of her mother, as if she'd been waiting there and had sensed Maren growing closer even before the sound of car tires on gravel had reached her ears. Like Maren's body sent out an imperceptible shout that her mother's body would always register and answer. A seed returning to its original, fertile ground. Maren opens her car door.

In the morning, she wakes slowly and lingers in that warm space between dreams like she never manages in Chicago. Outside, the creek rushes over the smooth, flat rocks in its bed. It's late—when Maren opens her eyes, morning sunshine is stretching across the soft, fuzzed flannel of the quilt in streaks of gold. Her childhood room is small, the bed only a twin, and Edie's knees bump into hers underneath the covers as she turns over in her sleep. Maren likes the feel of Edie's warm breath against her cheek. Now that she's awake, she can hear the small sounds of her mother in the kitchen, trying to be quiet as she starts preparing for the day's festivities. It's strange to be back in this room; she suddenly feels farther from the girl who lived here than she ever has before.

She untangles carefully from the blankets and pulls on a pair of jeans. For a moment, she looks at Edie lying there, at the dark cloud of her hair across the blue-flowered pillow case and her arm flung out across the mattress. Maren presses three fingers into the skin above her sternum, that careful cage for the flutter she always feels when she thinks about Edie.

Her dad is hacking at the kudzu climbing the sides of the house. Every summer now, her dad has to beat it back with a machete. Every year, it comes back stronger than before.

“Can I help?” she asks, setting her coffee down on the porch rail.

Her dad bends his face down toward the sleeve of his pale-worn denim shirt, catching the lines of sweat before they reach his eyes. “Sure, Bug.”

She smiles at the old nickname and takes the blade from him, wooden handle first. She spends several minutes chopping at the woody roots, then ripping the long, tenacious arms down from their fingerholds in the siding. Piled on the ground, the vines look innocuous, pleasant even—those deep green leaves, lushly growing in groups of three all along the stems.

“That should about do it for now.” Her dad gathers up the piles. He’ll burn them out behind the barn. “You wanna come back in August? You can do it all over again.”

Before Maren can reply, her mother calls from the porch. “Time to start the corn.”

“Now that’s a better job,” says her dad. “Go on, I’ll finish with these.”

“Such a nice girl,” Maren’s mother says as they arrange stacks of corn inside several laundry baskets from the Dollar Tree. “You should have brought her sooner. I’m so glad you’ve got a friend like that up there in that city.”

“Girlfriend.” Maren finishes her basket and they carry them over to the creek.

“What did you say her folks do?” They set the corn down into the rushing water. On top of the baskets, they use large rocks to hold down a plastic tote lid.

Maren wipes her hands on the back of her jeans. “Her mom is a pediatrician and her dad is an investment banker.” She can see Edie standing on the front porch and waves at her.

“Well, I’m glad she could come down with you. I wish you were staying longer.”

Maren turns back to her mother. “I know. I’ll come again sooner, though. And stay longer next time.”

Her mother smiles but doesn’t say anything back. Maren can tell she doesn’t believe it.

The first time Maren spent Christmas with her, Edie’s entire extended family came to dinner at her parents’ townhouse. After the meal, while everyone was sitting around with coffee and the remnants of pie, Edie’s brother showed them pictures of his newest design project.

“Don’t get Maren started on tiny houses, Michael.” Edie looked so lovely that night in her soft green sweater dress.

“What do you mean?” Michael turned to her. “You don’t like tiny houses, Maren?”

“No, I like them just fine,” she said. “It’s just—I mean, they’re trailers. People have been living in them for ages, but everyone talks about tiny homes as if they’re a new and novel concept.”

“She calls them hipster trailers,” Edie added, and smirked at the look Maren gave her.

Michael shook his head and pointed at the sleek, modern design on his phone screen, its matte black siding and the new metal roof slanting down over a steel-framed bay window. “Does that look like a trailer to you?”

Maren shrugged. “The point of a trailer is that it’s small, affordable, and it can be moved. How is a tiny house different?” She knew how it was different. Everyone in that townhouse knew how it was different.

“I mean, tiny homes are about certain values, you know? Small footprint, eco-friendly. Tiny homes are a specific choice. A trailer is—well, you know.”

Maren kept smiling, but she felt brittle. A little dried out. “I guess it’s just the hillbilly in me,” she said. Everyone laughed, just like she wanted them to.

“Why was the corn in the stream?” Edie asks later, as they bring the dripping baskets over to the fire pit. Half of Sugar Creek is already there in the yard or standing by the barn with her father, beer cans in hand.

“It has to be soaked first so the husk doesn’t burn while it roasts.”

They set the laundry baskets down beside Maren's aunt, who is sitting in a camp chair by the hot coals. “I saved this sweet corn all year,” Jane tells Edie. “Had it sitting in my big freezer with Maren’s name on it. It’s always been her favorite.” Jane leans forward and the metal frame of the chair creaks. Her skin is freckled, soft and loose now around her elbows and upper arms. Aunt Jane had kept Maren every sick day and holiday, on snow days and in the summers. She’d

fed Maren and taken her for chocolate dipped ice cream cones at the Dairy Queen when she earned all *A*s on her report cards.

Jane arranges the ears of corn end to end and then covers them with the hot coals and the white, flakey ash.

"We'll feed you good while you're here," she says to Edie. "Make sure you get some fresh air. I don't know how you two make it in that place."

"I've always lived in the city," Edie says. She is smiling at Jane. Maren has seen her smile at the first graders she teaches in the same exact way. "Do you always cook corn this way?"

"Lord, no," says Jane. "Just for special occasions. When it's just me I throw a few ears in some boiling water and call it done. But there's nothing tastes better than corn this way. You'll see."

"I'm looking forward to it." Edie is smooth and easy and wonderful, and Maren's mother has been introducing her to everyone as her daughter's "real good friend" from Chicago.

"I'm gonna send you back with a jar of my pickles, too," says Jane. "You can take that on an airplane, can't you?"

Maren's father calls to her from the barn, and she cups her hand around Edie's elbow for a moment. Edie nods at her and goes back to talking to Jane, so Maren crosses the yard alone.

"Hey, Dad," she says when she reaches him, and he pulls her closer with an arm around her shoulders.

"Bill's wondering about the union up in Chicago. They got one for teachers up there?"

“Sure,” Maren says. “Edie and I both pay dues. They just negotiated a very small raise last year.”

“Our union don’t do nothing but complain and take our money,” says her uncle Bill. He lives about a quarter mile further along Sugar Creek and works as a pipefitter at the power plant with her dad. “At least the teacher’s union finally got onto ‘em down in Charleston. You like it up there in Chicago?”

“I do,” says Maren. “I miss home, but I’m getting some really good experience in the city schools. And Edie is there.”

Bill nods. His beard is streaked with more silver than she remembers. He used to ride a motorcycle, back when Maren was very young; she’d always longed to ride behind him into town, her dad’s cooler younger brother, but her mother always said no. “Nice of you to bring her down. She probably don’t get out of that city much. There used to be a summer camp for inner city kids up at Blackwater Falls. Always thought that was nice. I can’t imagine being hemmed in by all that concrete.”

Maren can feel the smile stretching out her lips like it’s a mask she’s wearing. “Edie and her parents like going to Lake Michigan in the summer.” She thinks about their lake house and the townhouse nicer than anything she’s ever lived in.

“Good for them,” says Bill, and his face is so open and kind Maren can’t bring herself to say anything else. “We’ll take good care of her while she’s here, won’t we?”

The yard is filled up with people now, the food laid out on tables, and Jane is taking the corn out from its cradle of coals. Edie is talking to some of Maren’s cousins, her hands flying

around her face like they do when she's excited about something. Maren slips out from under her father's arm and gravitates, as always, back to Edie.

"They're telling me the right words to say here," Edie tells her as she slips an arm around her waist. Her cousin Jamie stares just a second too long and flushes when Maren meets her eye.

"Edie says when she wants sugar in her iced tea she orders *sweet tea*. I told her it's just tea here."

"And *soda* is *pop*," Edie continues. "And you never told me about pepperoni rolls."

"That's a damn shame," says her younger cousin Sam, deadpan. "Treason, you ask me. You a West Virginian or not, Maren?"

Before Maren can think too hard about that, or answer, Jane comes up to them with a plate wrapped in foil. "One of you mind running this down the road to Liz? She's been having a real hard time. I doubt she'll make it out here tonight."

"I will," Maren volunteers. "I haven't seen her yet, and I want to take Edie down along the creek."

"I'll see you when I get back?" Edie asks Jamie and Sam.

"Sure," says Jamie. "We'll be here."

Past Maren's place, the road doesn't even have gravel anymore—just dirt packed down by years and years of people driving their vehicles over it. Strips of tall grass grow around the tire paths. They walk beside Sugar Creek, the water rushing along with them, tumbling over itself, eager for something just out of sight. There's a curving stretch of land that opens up

midway, a break in the rock and hillside and forest—the field once held corn, but now only grows weeds and, of course, kudzu. It's already covering the utility poles clear up to their tops, and it spreads out around them like a deep green curtain falling to the ground.

"Who's Liz?" Edie asks as they walk.

"Jane's daughter. She's just a little younger than my parents—Jane is actually my great aunt. Anyway, Liz has lived back here for years. She hurt her back working at the aluminum plant and had surgery on it when I was a kid."

Maren hesitates. Liz isn't a secret. Everyone around here knows. If she'd been talking about Liz before this trip, back in Chicago, she wouldn't think twice about telling Edie. Before that *New Yorker* story and that tone in Edie's voice when she talked to Maren's family.

"She's had a difficult life since then," Maren says.

Liz's place is an old double-wide parked on a little patch of flat ground near the creek. Some years, when there's been a lot of snow and it melts quickly, or during a particularly wet spring, the water rises up and out of the creek bed and floods the bottom of the trailer. Every time, Maren's father tries to convince Liz to let him move the trailer further back. Every time, Liz declines.

"I need the sound of the water with me," Liz tells them. "It makes me feel like myself."

There are flowers planted in the bottom halves of old milk jugs, lining the steps up to the front door—orange marigolds and purple pansies and the small white heads of snapdragons. Edie waits at the bottom of the steps and pushes gently at the old glass bottles strung together for a wind chime and hung from an old flag pole. They call out brightly as they strike each other—

hollow, breathless little notes. Maren thinks that if the creek had a language, it would sound like wind chimes made from empty Jim Beam bottles.

Liz opens the door. She is much thinner and looks much older than Maren remembers her. She steps outside and wraps Maren in a hug. Through the thin denim button-up Liz is wearing, Maren can feel her shoulder blades slide and move.

"We brought you a plate," she says, and gestures down at Edie, who is holding the food and watching them.

"Oh, you didn't need to do that." Liz has a scratchy voice. A longtime smoker's voice. Maren used to try to make her voice sound like that, but she only managed to sound like she had a bad cold. "And who's this?"

"This is Edie," says Maren. "My girlfriend."

Edie steps forward and holds out her free hand, but there's an odd hesitation in her movements. For a moment, Maren feels as if she has stepped outside of her body, as if she is viewing herself from a slight distance—herself and the clearing, the trailer and Liz. Unfixed from herself, ghost-like, she hears Liz speaking as someone detached. The extra vowel sounds stretching out in Liz's mouth. The way the ends of words drop off like leaves in the Fall. She sees the baskets her mom collects and gives out as Christmas gifts hanging on an iron stand in the living room just beyond the trailer door. The hand-painted wood and shale signs from years of holiday craft fairs at the fire hall. She sees this place as someone else might see it, someone with no part in this place. She sees the shabbiness and the kitsch.

But then Liz steps forward and holds on to Edie's outstretched hand with both of hers.

"Wonderful," Liz says. "How wonderful."

“I hope you’re hungry,” Edie’s voice sounds smaller than usual. “Jane sent a little of everything.”

“She always does.” Liz takes the plate and sets it carefully on the porch rail.

“We missed you at the house,” Maren tells her.

Liz’s fingers move restlessly. She runs them down the seam of her jeans, over the graying wood of the porch. She folds herself at the waist, bends down toward the old milk jugs and strokes the petals of the marigolds.

“I wanted to be there,” Liz says. “It’s been a bad week, though. I’m out of my pills—“ She trails off into silence.

“There’s plenty of time if you change your mind.” Maren doesn’t have much hope of that; she says it anyway.

And then Edie says, “I hope I see you there later.”

Liz looks up. Her hair is half-sprinkled with silver, soft wisps of curl cropped close to her head. When she smiles at Edie, it breaks her face open like sunlight bursting through the crack in a cloud. Pills and liquor and more pain than a body should have to handle have whittled her down, have worn away at her and left their marks all over her body, but her smile is the same one Maren remembers. And still, there are creek songs and there are flowers.

“If you need anything,” says Maren, “just holler.”

The first time Maren kissed Edie, they were in Edie's dorm room. They were sophomores, and it was the week before finals. Maren had gone over to study but never even opened her Psychology textbook.

Edie had strings of little white lights taped to her ceiling, and with everything else turned off, they looked like stars winking from above. They were sitting on Edie's bed, her fuzzy blue blanket covering both their laps, whispering even though no one else was around. Edie's eyes were large and dark, and Maren could see the lights above reflected in her pupils. Edie shone. Her hair smelled like apples and her cheeks were perfectly rounded, with two dimples on either side of her mouth.

It was Edie who moved first, Edie who leaned in and pressed her lips to Maren's. Of course it was—brave and quick and wonderful Edie. Kissing her was like driving through a tunnel underneath a mountain; Maren had the sense that she was moving toward the heart of something dark and secret and old as the world. Older maybe. Eyes closed, she flew further and further along, and then, when she dared to open them, there was a soft dazzling light ahead of her, and there was Edie. There was Edie all the way through.

The sun hangs low in the sky as they walk back. The mountain has thrown the field into shadow, and the open expanse feels changed. The kudzu-covered poles loom above them.

Edie breaks the silence. "It's kind of creepy through here now." Maren brushes her hand against Edie's arm and feels goosebumps, though the night is warm.

“The trick is you don’t look around at night. Not at open spaces, anyway, because you might see something looking back.”

“What?”

“Yeah. You just have to keep your eyes on the road ahead. If you ignore them, they’ll ignore you.”

Edie slides her hand down to take Maren’s. “Is that, like, a West Virginia thing?”

“My best hillbilly trick,” Maren agrees, and Edie laughs.

“You sound different here.” Edie’s fingers are still tangled up with hers.

“What do you mean?”

“Your accent,” Edie says. “Your words go all soft around the edges. You sound like you’re from here.”

Maren concentrates on the way her lungs expand when she takes a breath. “Is that a bad thing?”

“Of course not,” says Edie. “You just never have before. Not with me.”

The field is behind them now, the lights from Maren’s house just ahead.

“I learned not to. People assume things.” Maren pauses, and then the words come out of her like they’ve been lying on her tongue all this time, waiting for her to acknowledge them. “Maybe you wouldn’t like it.”

Edie stops walking and pulls Maren closer. “Don’t be ridiculous. I like *you*.”

Edie’s eyes are wide, her face close to Maren’s as the light falls down around them and the shadows unfurl and blossom. Her hair twists and curls outward, a frame for the face Maren never tires of studying. She can smell the Tide detergent Edie's cotton tank top was washed in,

and the deeper, more complicated scent of skin and sweat and body lotion that's Edie underneath her clothes. She shines. Tonight Maren is the one who closes the gap between them, who presses their mouths together. Not a single thing in this holler comes easy, but is taken and held by tooth and fingernail. Maren is a fast learner. She holds on to Edie.

Back at the house, Edie joins Sam and Jamie again and Maren excuses herself. She crosses the gravel road again and starts climbing, weaving around the trunks of trees and following the faint deer path at an angle up the hill. The soft layer of last year's brown leaves and pine needles soaks up the sound of her footsteps, leaving only the crack of an occasional stick underfoot to disturb the quiet. She climbs higher, her legs beginning to burn and her breath turning choppy and labored. It's been so long since she made this walk. Since she knew the mountain.

Finally, she stops at the large outcropping of rock that used to be her own secret place. Too far for any of her cousins to follow or care about and out of sight of all the houses on Sugar Creek. From the top of the largest boulder, the tree-line falls away toward the valley below, and the mountains all around her are visible, nestled together in jagged, retreating lines that seem to stretch out forever, tucked into their neat ranges. Their gently rounded tops, worn down by long centuries, are changing from deep green to gray and shades of black against the sky turning toward night. As Maren watches, the sun slips behind the mountains and everything purples and bleeds pink and navy at the edges. The stars appear like holes punched into the sky, like glittering

diamonds the mountain offers to her hands. This nightly gift, this shocking wealth spilled out over her, asking everything and nothing. Something relaxes inside her, a hidden knot unlocking all along her spine. She feels the absurd urge to weep. All day, she'd felt wrong in her skin. A terrible mix of pride and shame. And now, the mountain has its say, and she sits and she listens.

When she reaches the edge of the yard again, it's full dark. Her cousin has pulled out a guitar, and there's a bonfire going in the middle of the yard. Edie is there and when she sees Maren her whole face goes soft and her eyes shine with light from the fire. Maren presses three fingers into her breastbone where the thump and echo of Edie rattles around, and she smiles back.

She'll ask Edie to come back here. She will talk and talk to everyone on Sugar Creek about Edie, will spill out all the wonderful things she knows until they see her clear. She'll say *girlfriend* until it rests natural on their tongues. She'll tell Edie about the sound the wind makes when winter comes and the trees all shake off their clothes, and how all her dreams look like the rolling backs of mountains stretching out in every direction.

Maren feels full up with love—she feels heavy with it. She imagines that she is one of the sugar maples that crowd all along the creek, all around her home. A snap and a thaw and what was once frozen inside her runs wild and sweet.

Nothing else to do but let it spill over.