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## Here. Shake: a box of stories

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**Here. Shake.**  
**A Box of Stories**

By  
Caitlin Morris

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Kathleen Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

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Caitlin Claire Morris  
May 16, 2014

**Here. Shake.**  
**A Box of Stories**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

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## **Abstract**

The essays, stories, and novel sections within this multi-genre collection have been assembled through the process of creating small fragments and parts. Through juxtaposition these small parts create multi-genre narratives. The first section, Family Artifacts, is comprised of two creative non-fiction essays tackling complex family dynamics, identity, class, and gender. The same subjects are extended into fiction in the second section titled Story Scraps featuring a short story and sections of a novel in-progress. This thesis offers vastly different examples of the author's voice and range as she works through the dangerous territories of complicated cultural and personal questions within the landscape of a multi-genre collection.

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## Preface

*“[T]he fragments of the Geryoneis itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it into pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragment numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box....Here. Shake”*  
-Anne Carson, Autobiography of Red

### 1) A Box of Stories

In my novel, *Book of Air*, a huntress named Margaret begins an unusual search. A writer, an acquaintance of hers, goes missing. In the author’s house, she finds a box of manuscripts and notebooks. She begins to piece together the story of what happened to the author using the scraps of paper and pieces of stories the author has left behind. They lead her to new cities and also, more boxes, more manuscripts, until eventually Margaret must become a writer in the process of putting the seemingly inexplicable pieces together. Through writing this novel and the other pieces in this collection, I’ve begun to look at writing stories in terms of scraps and the boxes that contain them.

In one of my favorite prefaces, Anne Carson begins *Autobiography of Red* with the image of the classical Greek writer Stesichoros’s *Geryoneis*, a text mostly lost except for a few papyrus fragments. She describes the experience of reading *Geryoneis*, feeling as if Stesichoros had shredded a poem, thrown it in a box with other items, and buried it. She ends her preface with the words, “Here. Shake,” as if her book is Stesichoros’s box, inviting readers to shake it and re-arrange it as they please. As I reflect on the process of writing this collection, Carson’s image of Stesichoros’s box comes to mind. Across the genres of creative non-fiction and fiction, I began each piece not as a completed essay or story in my mind, but

as a series of fragments. In many ways, each essay and story is still in fragments, sewn together through a narrative.

Recently, a well-established writer asked me where my stories come from. The question surprised and troubled me. Her question first surprised me because she wasn't asking for the literary theory or context behind my writing (an explanation I'm used to giving in the academic environment), but rather where my stories come from apart from the theory realm: where do the stories begin inside me? And second, I was troubled because I had absolutely no answer for her. That question has stayed with me throughout the process of writing and compiling this collection. As I see these stories before me and look back at the process of creating them, I think I can best answer that my stories arise from fragments, small scraps, the kind a person might find in Carson's box.

## 2) The Projectionist's Queue: Creative Non-Fiction

Both of the creative non-fiction pieces included in *Here. Shake.* arose from trying to understand parts of my own history that troubled me or made no sense on both personal and socio-political levels. For me, the process of writing both pieces was similar to Patricia Hampl's process which she describes in her essay "Memory and Imagination." She sees memoirists as looking back at their own experiences as through they are projectionists watching a series of photographs out of order. She explains that memoirists reread their lives to look for what stories lurk within the jumble of images.

In writing creative non-fiction, I choose to write about the images and memories that seem to be contradictory when I hold them up next to each other. The process of writing "Samuel" became an act of holding up all of the accounts of my grandparents' life together,

many of which are incomplete and seem to contradict one another. I held those stories against the one life I knew the best, the life of their cat, Samuel. Through telling all of the fragments of my grandparents' life next to that of their cat, the emotional truth of the story began to appear as I saw and felt it. The cat became not only the vessel for all of my family's repressed and hidden feelings, but also a way for me to join in conversation with my own memories through his story.

Similarly, in "Harmonie", I wanted to explore the vastly different realms of class and privilege I have in my own version of Hampl's slideshow. As my life has moved overseas, through the Midwest, and back to the Pacific Northwest again, I have picked up vastly different portraits of myself and how I fit into the world economically and culturally. I wanted to see what would happen when I laid out those portraits in contrast to each other. As with "Samuel", "Harmonie" began in fragments: The Part, The Jacket, The Show. Each portrait, as they progressed, began to converse with the previous, until I came to an understanding of myself as a person who has lived "between, under, and through" economic and cultural barriers.

I titled the creative non-fiction section "Family Artifacts" because both stories began with digging through their respective boxes of memories and forgotten objects, but I hope they provide me with more than a new perspective. I want to shed light on the complicated implications of the time and place in which my grandparents and parents grew up. I hope "Samuel" provides a portrait of the damages gender expectations had on a marriage and also the dangers of a family that keeps their feelings secret and hidden. I hope that "Harmonie" tells a story of how contemporary American privilege looks to someone who has seen extreme ends of the socio-economic spectrum and how that can simultaneously blind and reveal

truths to a person. Those are the greater themes that have arisen from the simple act of digging through boxes of memories, placing the slides in the projector, letting them run, and seeing what stories reveal themselves.

### 3) A Search for Scraps: Fiction

I have called the second section “Story Scraps” because “Twelve Crossings” and *Book of Air* came out of their own collections of story fragments. “Twelve Crossings” developed as a scavenger hunt through my own experiences and also the small bits of information I could find about Juárez, Mexico and the femicide occurring there. While the story is fiction, “Twelve Crossings” began by pairing two fragments from my life, echoing my approach to creative non-fiction.

Several of my friends from Seattle developed an interest in Spanish language, as well as Latino and Chicano culture, while we were in high school, and most of them have spent the majority of their adult lives in various parts of Mexico. For many years, I heard about their experiences, but only last year was I able to visit them. I consider myself well traveled, but during that trip I was confronted by the difference between the myth of Mexico I had created in my mind and the scenes before me. I had traveled through areas of poverty before, but what struck me was my ability to build an idealized picture of a place so clearly shaped by my own privilege.

Around the same time, I heard a news story about a woman in taking vengeance on Juárez bus drivers who participated in the ignored and horrendous mass murder of women in that area. She calls herself Diana, the Killer of Bus Drivers. When I held up my own experience next to this news story, I saw an opportunity to collide the two stories in one narrative to

see what could happen. Through fiction, I wanted to create a character who held extreme versions of my own misplaced and privileged fantasies of Mexico and place her right at the heart of its violence. I wondered what an encounter with Diana would reveal about both women.

While my stories manifest in both fiction and creative non-fiction, the similarities between my approaches to both genres became apparent as I put together “Twelve Crossings.” I wanted to be as emotionally true as I could to El Paso and Juárez, but I’ve never been to either place. I researched the city streets, found images of the border, and also learned as much as I could about the horrific murders. The research came slowly through articles, photos, maps, and my brief memories of places in Mexico far from the border. While I tried to remain as accurate as I could, I am sure there are many moments and details that I misconstrued.

I hope that these gaps tell as much as the fragments I’ve put together into a narrative. I hope the story begins a conversation about places women can’t go and the places someone with privilege cannot access. Even further, I hope “Twelve Crossings” raises questions about the fact that it is fiction written by a person of privilege about a group of marginalized and silenced people that she does not belong to. I chose the second person plural narration to exaggerate these facts by implicating the reader in the protagonist’s acts as she moves through her twelve crossings.

#### 4) Book of Air

In contrast to the research required by “Twelve Crossings,” *Book of Air* is a work from the fragments of my imagination spurred by the literary theories, tropes, and types I’ve encountered in the academic world. I began *Book of Air* as a series of fictional responses to

the theory and craft I've encountered in my MFA program. I immediately saw the short pieces as linked, although when I first began to write them, the links were far from obvious. The story of Elliot—the missing author—arose out of my fascination with the process of writing. I have never completed a novel, and when I started *Book of Air* the idea sounded immense and frightening, in contrast to the often-canonized male authors who seemed to promote and front the novel as a singularly masculine activity. I was tired of reading the women created by my favorite authors—Hemingway, Murakami, and Marquez—who for the most part seem flat and often in service of a male protagonist's development. I wanted to write a piece re-wrote the female into the authorial space.

Out of those two impulses, I created Margaret who speaks a strong "I" voice and does not romanticize literary arts as does Elliot, her somewhat stalker-ish author and admirer. Margaret is his muse, and I wanted Elliot's voice to be grandiose, as well as unaware of the more complicated nature of the relationship between himself and Margaret. She is more complex than a traditional muse.

At the same time, I became interested in the idea of characters reclaiming their own voices within the text, once again rejecting the classically singular male author. I decided to have the author's characters flee, and further, to split the hero into two figures, a male and a female. Those two characters became Jack and Anna. In *Book of Air*, Jack and Anna literally run away from the Elliot's page and seek refuge on an island where Margaret eventually finds them.

I also wanted to see a female claim her space not only as an author but also in literary theory writing about texts. I created the character Dr. Archer, a professor, whose disappearance is linked to Elliot's disappearance. On her hunt for Elliot's whereabouts, Margaret also

discovers how Dr. Archer's work is linked to Elliot and Jack and Anna. My story culminates on Isle Moria, a place mentioned in many of the texts Margaret finds in her search, where the truth of Elliot's disappearance, his book, and Dr. Archer's work is revealed.

As with the creative non-fiction essays, *Book of Air* is developing in small parts. I see the separate parts of *Book of Air* included in *Here. Shake.* as linked through the story's greater narrative, but as of now, they are scraps of a much larger work. Getting *Book of Air* to this point has been a process of shredding my fragments and shaking them together. I have broken the story into three sections: The Book of Margaret, The Book of Elizabeth, and The Book of Jack and Anna. The three sections tell three stories with different characters, all seemingly disconnected. In the finished novel, I envision a fourth and last section, titled Book of Air, in which all of the characters collide, finding themselves on the same island, Isle Moria. For the purpose of this thesis, I have included small descriptions at the beginning of each section to help my readers navigate the fragments of this story. Similarly, Book of Jack and Anna and Book of Elizabeth are fragments from much larger narratives that serve as representative examples of the bigger picture. These scraps create the outline of where *Book of Air* is headed and how it will progress.

Much like the essays in "Family Artifacts" and "Twelve Crossings," *Book of Air* addresses much more than the stories at hand. It experiments with giving characters historically silenced the chance to speak. It examines the questions of privilege, particularly who has the privilege to speak someone's story. I hope to address these questions as the book continues outside of this collection, as more pieces get added to the box, as it continues to shake.

**I: *Family Artifacts***

**Creative Non-Fiction**

## Samuel

When he was finally in the dark, alone, Sam stalked the house with his heavy paws. First he circled the rooms, quiet except for the electric hum of the refrigerator. His stomping made a sound almost too heavy, too loud for a cat. I could hear him across the house. He would then begin his nightly terrors. He slapped and scratched the doors with his claws until the doors vibrated in their frames like tall wooden drums, and he would yowl a low mourning cry from the back of his throat. I don't know if it was out of loneliness, boredom, or a desire to disrupt the quiet sleep of his captors, but he would stubbornly perform his nightly cries like a wound up alarm, reset at dawn.

Sam would wake me up with his nightly racket and, unable to sleep, I would open my bedroom door. His paw would fall, expecting the door, and he would make a sound not like a meow, but a spit. Then he would wait for me to take him up in my arms. This was our secret.

I picked up his heavy body and carried him to my bed. After I lay back down, he circled around me, his long, sharp claws pulling threads from the comforter. He plopped himself in the circle created by my bent arm and head. He began to purr, a guttural grumble, and knead the blankets with his claws. As the purring grew deeper and faster, his claws would stretch longer, towards my eyes, my jugular. I would be too afraid to force him away. I remember the deep purple marks. How his mouth opened. His cobra teeth.

\*\*\*

My grandparents always had cats. When I was a toddler they owned a Siamese named Hillary that would hiss at me when I crawled too near. My grandmother collected cats, always stopping at one or two real ones, and then moved to kitten stationary, Maine Coon

mugs, jeweled lapel pin Burmans. She even stenciled her laundry room walls with tabbies perpetually chasing after red, blue, and yellow balls of yarn.

During my summer visits, she took out portfolios of water-colored American Short Hairs playing in flowerbeds, Siberians huddling under roofs, and Balinese hiding between pillows. She even painted a portrait of my grandfather holding Sam next to the shed. The painting hung in my parents' hallway.

"My mom never could paint people," my dad said, whenever he passed it.

In my grandfather's water-colored arms, Sam's brown striped coat and elegant white belly gleamed. His eyes were his usual state of wide shock that made my friend laugh when she first saw them. She whispered to herself and him, "crazy eyes."

In my first memory of Sam, I was ten, playing in my grandparent's living room with my grandma's set of Lincoln logs from her childhood. I remember the smell of old wood. The aged tape that held the four corners of their box together, now brown and almost useless. I must have known a new cat lurked in the house, but I hadn't seen him yet. Maybe it was the Lincoln Logs, their old smell similar to his new owners, maybe it was because I was on the floor like a playmate, building up and tossing logs on impulse. No matter how or why, he appeared, creeping on his white paws to the perimeter of the scene, stooping his brown and black striped head low to the ground, assessing the moment through every sniff and brush of a whisker. He was young, but already aware of danger.

\*\*\*

Behind my grandparents' house, spread thin trees, a tall peninsula forest, not the old growth that reigned deeper inland. The trees were thick enough to make you feel you could get lost in them before you hit the highway on the other side. My grandparent's cul-de-sac

carved right through the trees. My grandma dreamed about living in Port Townsend, but Port Hadlock, a twenty-five minute drive away, was as close as they could get. I always guessed that Port Townsend reminded her of the small English town she and my grandpa lived in for two years, while my grandfather served in the air force. They knew they would never be truly city folk, so when they found this new home in its pocket of trees, they left Seattle and took it.

Sam began his life in those trees, just as my grandparents began their retirement. In the morning, after my grandpa turned on the coffee pot, Sam would slink down the stairs from the deck to the ground below, through the rose garden, past the gazebo, through the last flowerbed. The bird houses my grandfather made, placed high up on poles to protect the birds from Sam's clawing grasp, stood as if they were guard towers between my grandparents' world and the unknown. I think of Sam as a carrier of memories from so many unknown places and tangles. He wasn't just the kind of cat that would bring in the occasional mouse. He was a hunter. He was a ghost.

\*\*\*

"I don't know how they do it," my dad would whisper under his breath as we drove away from my grandparents' house along the Kitsap peninsula's winding roads and dense evergreen trees. According to my dad, my grandparents had a way of making their cats fear people. We knew Sam through tufts of fur left on beds and chairs. Whenever we visited, he was a flash in the corners of our eyes, a streak up the stairs, a slow furry shadow across the edges of the thick forest.

My grandparents gave him and the other cats release collars that snapped open if caught by a loose branch, ensnared in a thicket, or entangled in a predator's claw. Sam went

through so many collars, I wondered how many snares, branches, and animals he battled and escaped.

\*\*\*

When I was twelve, my grandmother bought me a book titled *Grandma Remembers*, a template for scrapbooking the photos and details of her life. Among the photos of my grandparents' courtship and marriage, she placed a photo from her childhood, more brown and tan than black and white. She's about nine or ten. Her eyebrows turn down in the prairie wind. Her dress spreads over the ragged grass and her bare knees. She leans against a fence post, her long hair tied in two loose ribbons, slipping down from a day of helping her mother with chores. Two kittens sprawl in the pleats of her skirt and another rests in her hands. It isn't a scene of tenderness, but one of toughness. These four young creatures, so small compared to the wide prairie, had made it through the winter.

*Grandma Remembers* included a question and answer section with pre-written questions and space for my grandmother to respond. One asked: What is your biggest regret? She answered: not going to art school. Women like her weren't supposed to dream of school. Instead, she did what she was supposed to. She married her high school sweetheart, my grandpa, the one who rode motorcycles, who took his shirt off for photographs, who once forced the school bus to pull over to the side of the street so he could drag a boy to the curb and slug him for getting fresh with her. She wore flower patterned dresses with thin belts. She learned to mix pie dough with a fork to get the crust to flake in your mouth. She didn't go to art school.

Each day she would sit in front of the piano, teaching herself more complex and faster

pieces. She would spend her afternoons learning new watercolor techniques from books. She painted farms, beaches, and cats, the stuff of her life.

\*\*\*

“I threw him across the room,” my grandpa used to say. At my grandparents’ house Sam had a small cardboard box lined in imitation lamb’s wool that perched above my grandpa’s workbench. His workbench spread the length of their garage, above it a small television and a mini-fridge, stocked with watered-down beer and Pepsi cans. Sam’s bed rested above a heavy metal hunk of a vice that we used to crush cans. The garage was the only place my grandfather was allowed to smoke. The walls were stained with yellow sludge.

Whenever Sam was bad—and I was never told what that meant—he would get “thrown across the room” as if it were an act of pride. It always happened in the shop. My mom would roll her eyes and whisper to me “*these* people and their *farm* mentality.” It was true, my grandpa once had cattle, sheep, and pigs. In Iowa, cats were for mice and if a litter were born in the fall, most kittens wouldn’t survive the winter. The house was no place for cats and if they couldn’t survive the barn, they shouldn’t be alive.

But I have a feeling that, if anything, behind that closed door, with the clouds of cigarette smoke and the smell of stale beer, my grandpa lifted Sam from his soft box perch and cradled him in his arms, putting his large nose close to the soft fur and scratching the sweet spot behind Sam’s ears.

\*\*\*

My grandparents soon bought another cat, a small white runt of the litter with an orange spot on his head and chronic health problems.

“I don’t know why they need another cat.” My dad sighed putting the phone down after my grandmother told him the news. She asked him what he thought she should name the small creature. My dad suggested Oliver, after Dickens’ orphan, but eventually she chose Frosty. “Like frost on a pumpkin,” she explained.

“A stupid name,” my dad said.

Sam taught the new cat to hunt. It would follow him through the plowed forest, through the framework of new houses, navigating freshly raised fences. They became a pair, a dark shadow followed by a streak of light in the brush.

\*\*\*

During a recent visit with my parents, my dad and I sat in the dining room, leaning our elbows on the table and occasionally sipping dry Washington cider. I asked him what it was like when he was a boy, to move from a farm in Iowa to Seattle, to go from plains to evergreens, “Did you think it was cool to be in such a big hip city, the early Seventies, rock and roll?”

He shook his head, “It was nothing,” and then to my confused look, “I didn’t know anything about it. My parents told me nothing. One day we were auctioning off the farm and animals and the next, I was here. I had no idea where I was.”

I dropped my hands in surprise, “They didn’t sit you down and explain Grandpa’s new Boeing job?”

My dad shook his head again, “nothing.”

\*\*\*

In the evenings, my grandmother would stand on the back patio, a thick sweater pulled over her tee shirt and jeans, hands in her pockets. She would tilt her stomach forward and belt out, “Sammmmmmieeeeeeeee.” Her choir-perfected alto projected towards the sun setting behind the high trees, calling him forth. After crunching his food in the basement laundry room, Sam knew to curl onto the pink towel laid out for him on the TV room chair, next to my grandmother’s. He would purr as she drank British-style tea and dipped cookies into the steaming milky liquid. Together, they watched BBC dramas about Victorian women escaping the high-walled manors of their society marriages and beginning new lives, new adventures.

\*\*\*

I remember asking my grandfather about when he bought his El Camino, the car’s olive green paint now rusting and the engine dripping a three-foot crater of corrosion into their driveway. He whistled.

“The day I bought that thing, fresh and new, I took it to see my girlfriend and we took it for a spin.”

My cheeks tingled in a blush. It was Christmas and the rest of our family mingled around a cracker tray within hearing range. No one turned their heads and I couldn’t tell if he was joking or telling me one of his deepest secrets. I knew about his “girlfriends.” He would casually call any female he spoke to his “girlfriend,” waitresses, church friends, even my mother and sometimes for a joke, me.

If we were at a diner and ran into a friend, he’d tap him on the shoulder, “Say, Marvin, let me introduce you to my girlfriend,” he’d wink at me with a jester smile and because of my age and obvious relation to him, everyone would laugh. But who was this wom-

an whom he took for a ride in his brand new El Camino in his middle age when he was still bold enough to challenge the high school boys to street races? Was it just a spin around the block before my grandma came home from her typing job or was she a girlfriend in the true sense of the word?

I had always known about his wandering eyes. He seemed to get away with those stories as an old man, boyishly telling me about the red-lipped prostitutes that would hang around the American Air Force base in Northern Italy and the women in burkas who would chase him in Tunisia and Morocco.

“Time to feed the cats,” my grandma called to him. He left for the door.

\*\*\*

The last time my grandpa drove me anywhere, we’d gone to a Mariners baseball game in Seattle. I returned to Port Hadlock with him for a weekend visit. It was a late game and our ferry docked on the peninsula side after midnight. After his cataract surgeries, my grandpa couldn’t see at night and we swerved the El Camino along the road, flirting with the white and yellow lines. Somehow we made it through the dark to my grandparents’ driveway and kitchen. It was two a.m. by then and my grandpa was happy and awake. He seemed to enjoy our secret late hour. Sam moved slowly along the wall to join us, stalking our shadows. My grandpa stretched his large knobbed hands out wide along the counter and wheezed a sigh, “I know just the thing for us.”

He pulled out a jar of freshly canned peaches from their peach trees and practically giggled as he pulled vanilla ice cream from the fridge. Before he could scoop out heaping spoonfuls into two bowls. Sam began to pace back and forth in across the kitchen floor. He bumped against my grandpa’s leg with each pass.

“Oh Sammy, I haven’t forgotten you,” he opened the refrigerator and pulled out a can of whipped cream. The *cat* can of whipped cream. In my grandparents’ fridge there was a brand for the cats and a brand for humans when it came to whipped cream.

“The cats like the sound of the aerosol can,” my grandparents would shrug sheepishly as they sprayed whipped cream into a small dish and set it on the floor, just as my grandpa did that night, asking Sam, “ready for whippie?”

As my grandpa and I let the fresh peach juice drip from the sides of our mouths, my grandpa whispered, “don’t tell your grandma.”

Sam lapped up the sweet cream. He didn’t know the years of whipped cream my grandparents fed him would kill him in the end, feline diabetes.

My grandpa smiled, he didn’t know love would be the death of him either. Three years later, the day after his memorial service, his peach trees would be with such a heavy yield, that we would spend the whole day filling every box we could find with sweet peaches.

\*\*\*

“I won’t go there,” my grandpa shook his head as he sat on a large boulder outside the Edmonds Ferry Terminal. The emphysema in his lungs forced him to pant heavily as he sat. My grandparents had come over on the ferry for the afternoon. We decided to lunch in Edmonds and spend the rest of the day window-shopping around the small beach town. I had suggested we go to a French restaurant. But my grandfather sat down on the first thing he could find, shaking his head, “That’s where your grandma and her boyfriend go.”

“What?” I said, assuming that he was using the word boyfriend, like he used girlfriend.

“Come on,” I held out my arm, “Mom and Grandma are already headed inside.”

He took a shallow raspy breath, grasped my arm and pulled himself up. We entered the restaurant in silence.

\*\*\*

I don't know what it looked like, the day my grandmother left my grandfather. No one probably saw the whole of it, how she decided that day would be the one. I later heard rumor of her writing a letter and, in cinema-style, leaving it and her ring on the bedroom dresser. No one but the cat could have known.

Sam could have seen it all from the pink towel laid out in their master bedroom for him. He could have first seen my grandma scoop up the other younger cat into a carrier and stumble down the steps and into her car. Did she keep the engine running outside as a promise to herself that she would see this through? Or was the house silent, car still, her motions deliberate and calculated?

Did she pet the white stripes running down Sam's forehead, scratch the pink patch behind his ears, kiss his nose, and promise him she would be right back, or did she lock him in the shop and leave without a word?

How long was the house silent and empty before my grandpa came home? How soon until he knew what had happened, that he had returned to a house and a life suddenly halved? Instead of angry, instead of slamming down his long fists, I imagine him taking Sam in his arms, sitting on the rose, flower printed bed, under the paintings of dancing cats, and crying. Is that where Sam learned to yowl? They say that for the two years of his life that remained, some nights my grandpa would wake the neighbors. They never told me how, but my grandpa's neighbor would call Pastor Don, and he would come to the house. Was his crying that loud? Did he yell? Did he smash the porcelain dishes bought in England, and burn the paint-

ings of the Short Hairs, the Balinese, and the Siberians? Did he bang on the doors? Would he scratch them with his claws?

Sam knew and I held him close because of what he saw.

\*\*\*

“We have the cat,” my mom’s voice cracked through the overseas call, as I listened in my college dorm room, “Your grandpa decided he’d rather live in a home, so your dad took the cat last weekend.”

I wondered if my dad talked to Sam as they crossed the Puget Sound in my dad’s truck, nestled in the hull of a ferry, or if the cat and son sat in silence, just a book’s crisp pages turning and the cat’s claws scratching the sides of his plastic carrier.

At the age of thirteen, Sam left the forest, the smell of the Douglas firs, the stalking presence of coyotes, and the stretch of land without fences. He left the sounds of the dishwasher tumbling, the churn and growl of my grandpa’s breathing, the slam of the bedroom door, my grandfather’s late night visits to the emergency room, his panic attacks and the quiet after.

My dad carried Sam the farthest he’d ever been away from his home. When my dad’s truck stopped and the door opened, Sam must have smelled the new place, his nose unsure of how to name it. He must have smelled so many more humans. The food scents weren’t Ensure’s milky residue or the plastic bitterness of TV dinners, but Filipino lumpia wafted from the north and Ethiopian injera from across the street. Sam pressed against the back of his carrier. When the feet stopped, the keys chimed, and the door opened, the smell of hardwood floors, the gas fireplace, and our kitchen’s kale, brown rice, beets, sweet potatoes, and goat’s cheese hit him in a warm gust. My dad set Sam down and opened the carrier’s small gate.

Sam stayed inside for a moment. What had been his cage now seemed safe. My dad gave the carrier a small shove. With that, Sam was ours.

Sam refused to go outside. We have a large backyard, lucky for living in a city. But regardless of the green lawn, the terraced vegetable garden, and looming trees, Sam stood before the open sliding door, refusing to move his raised paw over the threshold. He sniffed the new air and moved his eyes wildly as if mapping this strange new land.

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Sam hid everywhere he could find, under my childhood bed, under my mother's writing desk, and also inside a hole he discovered in the bottom lining of one of our living room chairs, a large stuffed chair with a wide box between the cushion and the lining. Sam made that space his cave. Most often, we only knew him by a tail or a front paw dangling from the bottom of the chair, and as he grew older, the chair began to emit loud snoring.

Sam began to love my dad's shoes. Maybe it was the family smell, father to son, or perhaps he recognized a similar pain. Maybe he recognized the pain of the suddenly unbound and lost; father, son, cat. Sam rubbed his nose against the white sneakers' mesh and curled into my dad's forest green shoulder bag. He tried to nestle his face into my dad's slippers feet, but my dad recoiled in disgust. My dad stared at the creature that he once used to bend down and pet on Christmas day, when the family was still together, all in sweaters.

I knew, those late nights of Sam's terrors, that if I didn't get to him first, my dad would slam out of his room, tying his bathrobe. He would pick up the cat, open the back screen door and throw him into the early morning cold. No matter the rain, no matter the wind. Several times I would wake up, the house empty, my parents gone to work. I would

begin to make coffee, and pull back the drapes from the kitchen sliding door, and jump at the sight of the wet shadow staring back at me, waiting to be let in.

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My mom began to sit with Sam on winter nights in front of the gas fireplace. She would warm her feet and let Sam pace around her, sometimes stretching his white belly out wide and close to the heat, breathing heavily. Other times he would sit, staring at the reaching flames as if he were thinking intensely, reflecting on something too dark and too secret for us to ever know.

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For as much as my dad loathed Sam, he took care feeding him, perhaps a bloodline burden. He would scoop mushy meat from a can twice a day and place it by a bowl of water and dry food. In the evenings he would feed Sam at five sharp, though Sam had begun begging two hours earlier, following my dad around the house, and running to his food dish with insistence. My dad had a system of stacking Sam's cat food cans in a specific color pattern to ensure that he wouldn't repeat meals too close together. I don't know what he thought would happen if Sam had "Tender Beef Feast" twice in two weeks, but we never found out because of my dad's meticulous system. Throw the cat out in the morning, and placate his palate in the evening. I don't think my dad was ever taught to love.

Once he told me that when he was very little, an only child like me, he asked his mom when he would get a little brother or a little sister. She looked at him, rolling her eyes, and muttered, "I ain't going through that again."

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The first time my mother tried to take Sam to the veterinary clinic, he refused to leave the hole in the living room chair. She turned the chair on its side, hoping to scare him out. When Sam refused to leave she went for her last option. She stuck her hands in to pull Sam out and withdrew them with two bloody holes in her palm. She doesn't remember how she got him to the appointment, but she does remember the blood.

On the nights that my mom would let Sam sit with her completing the crossword puzzle, he began to attack. If my mom adjusted her feet or moved suddenly he would lash out with his fanged teeth and claws, and in a swift blink, he would put two holes in her arms, surrounded by a halo of scratches. After, he would slink around the edges of the house, as if feeling some kind of remorse.

My mom began to avoid him, though he begged to sit with her. She would even block him with a pillow if he tried to get too close, saying, "I'm sorry Sam. You know what you'll do."

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The last Christmas with my grandpa we took the ferry like always, leaving Sam at home. Instead of driving to the house on Sycamore Loop, we continued straight into town to his new apartment. On Christmas Eve, we ordered white wine, twenty-three-dollar fish, and whiskey at a restaurant my grandfather chose because he knew the owner and called him "Buddy." By the end of the night we were drunk and laughing at how grandpa already knew the names of all the waitresses. On the way home, we were pulled over twice for a burnt-out taillight. The second policeman made my dad step out of the car and walk in a straight line. No one said much for the rest of the drive. Christmas morning, my grandfather marked the

date of my college graduation on his calendar in shaky ink and asked me to promise that I would come back home. I told him I promised.

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I learned my grandfather was dying three weeks before my college graduation. I attended a Swiss school and kept in touch with my parents mostly through email. My dad added a P.S. to an email about our upcoming graduation and travel plans: "It doesn't look like your grandfather will make it another week." I called my mom at four a.m., her time. She told me to stay where I was, to graduate. That night I found myself at a friend's door. He handed me a beer and listened as I told him all about our cat.

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The day my grandfather died, my mother and I were in a hotel room in Paris. I graduated the week before. This was our celebration. We'd just eaten croissants filled with chocolate and café au lait served by women in black dresses and white lace aprons. My mother was sitting on the bed when the phone rang.

That afternoon, my mom and I missed our flight back to Switzerland. We waited in a bright orange corner of Charles de Gaulle airport and watched the rain fall onto the tarmac. My mom looked at me and repeated, "He did the best he could. He did the best he could."

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I crossed the nine time-zones to get to the memorial service. Someone had placed tissue boxes at the end of every other pew. The Lutheran pastor, who visited my grandfather on his countless late nights, talked about forgiveness.

We still owned my grandparents' old house. All the family, except for my grandmother, sat in the front room for the last time and looked at the furniture that would soon be auctioned off. My dad told me someone had told my grandma. But by then, I hadn't seen her in two years. I wondered what she knew. I looked out the kitchen's sliding windows and noticed the rose garden had begun to burst in bloom. I found shears still in the kitchen drawer. For an hour I walked through the tangled branches, avoiding the prick of the thorns, grasping the fists of color and cutting them until I had a bouquet that one bag couldn't contain. I wrapped bunches of stems in wet paper towels, fastened them in rubber bands.

The bouquet stood on our dining room table for almost four weeks. The union of each color in that vast, now weeded and overgrown garden, shone through the house. Sam tilted his head up to the table and sniffed. I wondered if he could recognize his home. I wondered if he could tell my grandpa was gone.

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Three years later, the spring of my first year in graduate school, I woke up to my phone buzzing with a text message. As I swiped the screen with my finger, I felt the grip of something lost again.

Mom Cell: Caitlin. Had to put Sam down two days ago. Sorry.

Sam had gotten skinny, no matter how much he ate. A few days before, the vet told my dad it was feline diabetes and then asked if Sam had been fed human food. My dad muttered something about whipped cream. The vet explained the daily shots Sam could take to keep his life.

I asked why they didn't let me take him. I imagined moving the sixteen-year-old cat

to my 300-square-foot studio, making him a bed in the window seat, holding him close, claws safely tucked under my arms as I injected him with insulin. “Why not ask me?” I snapped into the phone. I would have done it.

“Think about your dad,” my mom said, “Think about how he saw your grandpa with needles stuck in him and oxygen tubes, unable to do anything that made him himself.”

“It would be no kind of life” my dad explained. He told me the vet was good to Sam. She petted him, put him on soft blankets. She told my dad she filled the room with love until he stopped breathing.

“He felt love,” my dad said. “Isn’t that the best way to go?”

## Harmonie

### The Part

My mother and I always joke that I've been in school since I was two-months old. After I was born, my mom had to teach, and she couldn't afford childcare or time off, so she brought me into her classroom at a private school. As she mouthed phonetics, and students moved about their math centers, I gurgled in the corner on a blanket. The school she worked for let me attend their preschool as a favor and I continued up until the fifth grade. There, many of my friends had bedrooms *and* playrooms, full-time nannies, and some even lived in gated communities where the skies above are official no-fly zones.

By high school, I knew that our one-story, two-bedroom life was different, but I started noticing how wealth was in the details. It was the early days of Steve Jobs' comeback, so you needed an iPod and a MacBook. I got the laptop, and the iPod that came with it, as a present from my aunt and uncle, who had become the patrons of my family. They've paid for my school, jumpstarted my retirement account and jumpstarted my whole family over and over again.

My aunt and uncle also own a wine cellar under the Pike Place market with their two friends: the owner of a First Avenue jewelry store and an architect who collects vintage Italian cars. These are the people against whom I compared myself, drew up my limits. But as I became aware of their edges, I opened myself up to a kind of freedom, the freedom to fake it.

I faked my way through college in Switzerland with scholarships and nannying, while boys zoomed around campus in their silver sports cars wearing Dolce and Gabana jeans with small metal plaques on their back pockets instead of labels. It was very easy to look the part. You needed leather boots, a good perfume, and it helped if you knew a thing or two about

cheese plates.

For the Americans, you also needed to like Billie Holiday and champagne. I learned to read Fitzgerald with nostalgia and how a proper dinner starts with Prosecco and ends with Vin Santo, but only if you're near Tuscany. Cappuccinos should be enjoyed before ten am and no later. I began to see that my mother and I belonged in the same world with the same limits: she bought second-hand emeralds from her hairdresser, scoped out used designer bags, and bought me jackets because they looked expensive.

### The Jacket

This Christmas my mother gave me a card. On the front a woman poses in the angular thin swerve of 1940's fashion sketches: pointed shoulders, narrow waist, bubble hips and sapling-thin ankles. The whole figure looks as if it were floating on the breeze like a delicate leaf. Before I even opened the card, we both looked at her and sighed. Inside, along with Merry Christmas, my mother had written: *this is redeemable for one Lululemon jogging jacket*. The day of our shopping excursion, we debated whether to just get a similar jacket somewhere else, but the final decision came from my mother: "I want to get you a jacket from Lululemon because it looks expensive." That's what my mother does.

That's what she did when her dad died when she was eight and her mom turned to drinking and strange men. That's what she did when she tried to raise herself and it seemed as if her brother did a better job at everything: honors, varsity sports, and pre-med at Stanford.

Forty years later, my mom teaches on a Native American reservation in the Pacific Northwest trying to help children survive childhoods like hers or worse, and her brother

heads a family of doctors and pays for our airplane tickets. My mom looks at her daughter and chooses to buy the expensive-looking jacket.

### The Show

I live for the hour when I am home under my fleece blanket with my computer on my lap and I can finally watch *Downton Abbey*. My boyfriend, Priyesh, doesn't get it. Not even the film-length Christmas special could convince him. He isn't wooed by the grandiose fantasy of the Crawley family cast into the social upheaval of the 1920s. He doesn't sigh at the life that could be when the Dowager Countess, proclaims down a gilded table "But what *is* a weekend?" Rather, his only comment is "Aren't they bored? All they do is move from sitting room to sitting room and change their clothes and then get fed." I have no answer. It sounds wonderful. I imagine myself in a large house with burgundy wallpaper, endless rooms for entertaining endless guests, the obligation of changing into your finest for dinner every night, and getting used to the anonymous hand opening doors before me.

### The Car

I know the limits for a family like ours. I've learned to draw up their edges. I know I've had more than most. I've worked, but there are those that will work harder than me and still have less. The boundaries are in my blood. My grandfather knew too. He knew that he would be a farmer the day his dad told him to give up his full-ride football scholarship to college so he could help work the fields. Twenty years later, after farms became big business and the small ones were lost, and after taking too many triple shifts at the Boeing plant, my grandfather couldn't stay awake enough to drive his El Camino out of the parking lot.

Bleary-eyed and senseless, he accelerated his car right into a light pole, but still smiled when

he saw the paycheck.

He always paid for everyone at the dinner table, putting his wallet next to his plate before he sat down, a mark of pride: he'd gotten somewhere he wasn't supposed to be. When he knew he didn't have long to live he took the money he'd collected over the years and bought a brand new blue car, one that a blonde teenage girl like me and an old farmer in suspenders and a straw hat like him could drive. He worked his whole life and when he left the world, he left me the blood, the boundaries, and the blue car.

### The Wine

"*Caitlin Morris*," my boyfriend says after I forgo half of my grocery money for a top-shelf wine and small wheel of Brie, "you have a champagne taste on a beer budget!"

I taught myself how to properly arrange a cheese plate in high school: a hard, a soft, a blue, and grapes or dried fruit in the middle. At that age, I also started picking up advice from nights spent over selections from my uncle's wine cellar. If you want a good and cheap white wine, then never buy Chardonnay. Cheap Chardonnay will never be a good Chardonnay. Under \$30, you're better off with a Pinot Grigio. Along with the cheese plate and the wine came the two categories in which I began to see the world: tacky and classy. Men in designer suits, foreign films, and restaurants with truffle oil on the menu were classy. Fast food, bowling, and anything suburban (cars, houses, and children) were tacky.

### The Plan

"Someday, love, when I have my millions," my boyfriend lets his hand sweep over the dashboard as we drive through the burnt South Dakota hills as though he's summoning a new world and wiping this one away, "It's going to be just us on beach with cocktails."

We both left Switzerland at the same time, degrees in hand. The recession had hit the year before, so we both went back to our old bedrooms, his in Columbus, Georgia and mine in Seattle, Washington.

My unpaid internships turned into odd jobs. I worked for a while at an antique store. Immediately when my uncle saw it, he laughed: “this is all junk. A real junk shop!” Priyesh began to work at a gas station selling lottery tickets.

“Now I’m a real Indian,” he laughed into the phone. He told me about the regulars who spent half their paychecks on rolls of missed chances, every time telling him: “Today’s going to be the day.” They sometimes told him what they would do with their millions. They all had their own plan.

And Priyesh did too. When his degree promised him one thing and the economy chose another, he took a job in South Dakota, a contracted position: no vacation days or health insurance. While people slept at their desks, making more dollars per-hour than he did, he and his best friend decided to go into business together, invent whatever they had to. They worked sixteen-hour days until, eight months later, he called me and said they’d made an eco-friendly nail polish remover, if only they could sell it, the numbers would be in the millions.

I ask him what he’d do with millions and he tells me: *pay off my parent’s house, pay for my sister and brother’s college, pay for Ba’s (his grandmother’s) medical bills and make sure mom can visit her each year, and get my dad out of his military contract in Afghanistan.*

He doesn’t mention a beach then, but sometimes he does and asks me: “want to join?” and I say, “Just as long as you take me to Downton Abbey first.” He rolls his eyes.

La Desserte

I recently hung a small print of a painting in my kitchen. I was drawn to the bowls of fruit, fresh flowers, and carafes of wine in long-stemmed decanters and how the wallpaper's blue flowers curve elegantly through deep red. On the right side, a woman bends over a table with her hands on a bowl of fruit. I cannot tell if she is picking it up or setting it down. She has a black frock and a white apron is tied around her waist. Her blond hair is piled on top of her head in a bun. Only after I started watching *Downton Abbey* did I begin to think about her life as a maid, her days probably spent in the big house with the red-draped rooms and nights in a shared room tucked away in a servant wing.

When I moved to South Dakota and saw our neighbors always sitting outside watching their trash burn in a large barrel, wearing torn pajamas, cigarette in one hand and 36oz soda cup in the other, I realized that I had not just been *acting* the role I'd been playing; in my life of whiskey tours in Scotland and clay baths on Santorini, I'd *become* the part. I wasn't sure where that left me. How can one person recall her parents hushed voices discussing whether they needed to go the food bank, and in the same breath recount a life in Switzerland with weekends in Monaco?

Perhaps that's why I love Matisse's *Harmonie Rouge, la desserte*, because the harmony comes from the red-flowered room's ambiguity. No lines separate the tablecloth and the wall. The woman could be a maid, her own mistress, or both. She is placing and taking away. It's an aesthetic of a world in between, under, and through lines.

### The Glass

This is what I did. I stayed in South Dakota with Priyesh, bracing my body against the prairie wind. I applied to schools at night and in the day potty-trained sixteen two-year-olds and worked in a coffee shop washing dishes until my hands cracked and bled and my clothes

reeked of tuna sandwiches, coffee grounds, and soap. I tried not to think about Switzerland.

I drove across the country to a school that pays me, and though it's not much, it's mine. At night in my 300-square-foot kingdom I take out a bottom-shelf bottle of wine and pour out six measured ounces into a water glass I bought for fifty cents at Goodwill. I think about the day when I'll get the merlot glasses I visit monthly at Crate and Barrel, the ones that make the showroom's angled white light glint in all directions. I think of how their wide bowls will keep the heat. I'll swirl the stem and stick my nose in deep, mouth open to taste the earthy scent.

## **II: *Story Scraps***

### **Fiction**

**Twelve Crossings**

## 1) Say Yes

Say yes when you get the invitation in the bone white envelope. Even before you rip open the gold sticker, embossed with your cousin's and her new husband's initials, C & L, Courtney and Louis, say yes to the return address: El Paso. Think about Cormack McCarthy, dry deserts, and horses in the dust. Say yes to your cousin's wedding celebration in four weeks, in El Paso, where your cousin and her husband have moved since Louis got his citizenship.

That night, after you've opened the letter, after you've clicked RSVP on the wedding blog, go to your parents' house for dinner. Your mother places her forearm flat on the mahogany table, wrinkling the satin runner, as if she's about to get serious and says, "Well don't you just wonder what this is really about?"

Don't say anything. Instead, think about burnt cliffs, the desert sun, and ranch gates. Feel as if already you're holding a secret.

"Thank God you said it, Sandy," your father smacks his whiskey on the marble coaster in front of him and the ice clacks together.

"I'm glad I'm not alone. It just seems odd the biggest part of the celebration is the citizenship. Don't you think?" Your mother is on her third glass of wine and she thinks she can get serious.

When your parents both look at you for an answer, glasses to their lips, say, "Yes, oh yes."

Keep the secret to yourself.

Before you catch the last MUNI train, say yes to the pact you make with your parents. Say yes again in hurried hugs promising you'll all make the best of it. They'll

RSVP in the morning. You're all going to support Cousin Courtney and Aunt Sarah. You'll make an adventure of it, "Let's make an adventure."

"Yes."

## 2) Click

When you get back to your NoPa apartment, making your nightly internet rounds, type "El Paso" into the search bar. Scroll through the images. Notice how in maps Mexico cradles El Paso with a reluctant hand. When you squint your eyes El Paso bleeds into Ciudad Juárez.

Feel your heart, a suddenly noticeable beating. Type "Juárez" into the search bar. Read the headlines: Murder capital. Drug traffickers. Serial killers. Imitators for sport. 400-1,000 women's bodies. Held captive. Raped. Tortured. Breasts bitten off. Ripped off. 39 pieces of charred bone. Mothers protest. Heads blown off.

Look away from the screen. Imagine the bodies in the desert. Late to the factory and locked out. The next morning, gone. Think about when you walk at home each night, keys placed between your knuckles. You always imagine fighting. You always imagine getting away.

Find the photos. Pink crosses in a row: Veronica, Esmeralda, Laura. *Ni una más*. Not one more.

Then you find her.

Click on "Diana, the Hunter of Bus Drivers." A sketched cartoon of a woman with bright blonde hair and sunglasses accompanies the headline. She holds a gun. She waits at a bus stop.

Read that buses are dangerous places for women in Ciudad Juárez. If left alone on a

bus, a woman is vulnerable, a body for rape, waiting for the bus driver to open her up, leave her in the desert. But in August 2013, a woman, blonde hair, Coco Chanel sunglasses, and a pistol in her purse began entering busses on the 4A route. She shot the drivers and then exited the bus, sometimes saying: “You guys think you’re real bad, don’t you,” before pulling the trigger. Soon a message was sent to the newspapers:

*You think that because we are women we are weak, and that may be true but only up to a point, because even though we have nobody to defend us and we have to work long hours until late into the night to earn a living for our families we can no longer be silent in the face of these acts that enrage us. We were victims of sexual violence from bus drivers working the maquila night shifts here in Juárez, and although a lot of people know about the things we've suffered, nobody defends us nor does anything to protect us. That's why I am an instrument that will take revenge for many women. For we are seen as weak, but in reality we are not. We are brave. And if we don't get respect, we will earn that respect with our own hands. We the women of Juárez are strong.*

*—Diana Killer of Bus Drivers*

Look again at the aerial photo of El Paso/Juárez. Look at the streets, with your heart beating, and wish that at the moment the photo was snapped from space, a bus was stopping along the 4A route and a woman with bleached blonde hair was reaching into her purse.

### 3) Shoot

That night, dream of her. You are circling around the earth, which orbits inside your mother’s wine glass. Her galactic hand swirls the small orb, her super nova anniversary ring clinking as she spins the galaxy around. Suddenly the earth’s gravity catches you and you fall

out of orbit, over North America, straight to Texas. The gaping metropolitan mouth of El Paso/Juárez sucks you into its throat. Cousin Courtney and her husband Louis wave at you as you land softly on a street, right behind Diana. A black plastic butterfly clip pulls her blonde hair back. A white leather purse tucks under her arm. You run to her and embrace her from behind. You feel hot and safe in the presence of a God, in the presence of every woman. She takes your hand and walks you to an empty bus stop. A bus pulls up, the doors swing open. She looks in her purse, but you've beaten her to it. The gun is warm like her, lighter than anything you've ever held. You feel as if you're a part of something so much bigger than yourself. You aim. You can't see the driver's face.

Wake up before you pull the trigger. Since you've woken up more turned on than you've felt in months, take the batteries out of the TV remote. Give in to her.

#### 4) Listen

Four weeks later when your airplane circles the El Paso International Airport, make sure to look for the winding thick line of the Rio Grande as it moves away from the Northwest Mountains. Even with all of your searching, you couldn't have imagined it would be this gray, this brown. After you land, feel the dry heat seep through the exit walkway as though it were a stale breath.

While your parents negotiate the Mercedes rental, try to listen to the conversations around you, more Spanish than the Mission. Listen for her name. Listen for Diana.

When the rental car slips into the city try to ignore the neon lights of fast food restaurants. Instead, focus on the mountains' evening silhouettes and the open sky they fall into, a sky looking over the border.

“Starving,” your dad stretches one arm and rubs his stomach with the other.

“Junk,” your mother gestures towards the blinking lights, “all we have to eat is junk.”

5) Again, say yes

At the wedding party, let yourself dance to the tin beats of top 40—beer cups, hook ups, and dancing all night long—as your cousin Courtney and Louis sing at the top of their lungs. Your dad hovers around the makeshift bar trying to maintain a buzz off watered-down beer. Your mother has gone straight for the Tequila with her sister, Aunt Sarah. They’re hugging each other, giggling, and sneaking cigarettes behind the house. Louis’ immediate family is still in Mexico so his side of the party is distant relatives and friends from his new full-time job at the day labor center.

Courtney met Louis during her year as an AmeriCorps volunteer at a day labor center in Brownsville, Texas. Louis, at the time, was an illegal day laborer and occasionally got work through her center. Courtney had told everyone she’d be home in a year, just a break before graduate school. When she met Louis and fell in love, they knew they had to make their future legal. He snuck back in to Mexico, found a job in a Juárez *maquila* in hopes of getting enough job stability to earn a tourist visa. At first, the money had been so bad that Louis considered running a few errands for one of the cartels he knew how to find. On one of her visits to San Francisco, Courtney had sworn you to secrecy. No one could know about the cartels. No one could find out about how for a few months she worked a night shift, sending checks across the border to keep Louis afloat. Eventually he found a second job and she quit hers.

Five years later, after Courtney moved to El Paso to commute across the border to visit Louis, he was finally granted a tourist visa. Last April, he and Courtney drove across the

border together into El Paso for the first time. After a 45-minute interrogation and search of their car, they drove directly to city hall and married. The next day, Louis filed for his official US Citizenship papers.

“Worth every second of waiting,” Courtney says through a piece of the cake Louis’s second cousin baked for the celebration, chocolate cake, red, white, and blue frosting. When Louis grabs Courtney and pulls her onto the patio’s makeshift dance floor, let them go.

Dance with the party’s strangers until you notice a young man in a green soccer tee shirt and jeans. Notice first that he knows how to wear jeans: a little tight around the back, a quarter-inch give around the thighs, and a straight leg that slightly wrinkles where the pants connect with his twill-fabric, crepe-soled shoes. He dances with a strange and sporadic confidence, his arms almost off beat, yet they seem to come around, catch his partner when it’s important. You can’t see it at first, but the more you watch him the more you realize how muscular his arms are as he spins an older woman with gray hair and red lipstick, cheering her on as she twirls and miming a pinch her to her bottom when the music stops. She laughs with a bold hoot and slaps him on the back.

You saw the young man earlier, dancing with a small woman with streaks of blonde in her long brown hair, but you can’t see her now, so move next to him. Take his hand. Notice how he raises his eyebrows and smiles. Begin to dance when the next song starts.

He sways his head, hair cropped close. His eyes are round, long lashes, giving his face a young, almost boy-like look. He’s looking right at you. Don’t say anything, not yet.

As he leads you to the patio’s edge, avoid thinking about the condoms you hid in your suitcase, and then tucked into your purse just in case. Instead, think of the desert and what’s hidden out there. Notice how the sunset’s red reaches over the mountains whose sharp ridges

seem to slice at the sky. Let your mouth open with the landscape's dark question.

He lowers his voice and raises his eyebrows, "the bodies are in the other direction," he points towards the river. Conceal your surprise.

He continues, "that's what all of the white people from the other states are interested in: 'So tell me about the bodies,' they always end up asking."

He imitates an American accent, "Are ya *spooked* to live here?" and laughs, "I tell them no. I have nothing to do with drugs, nothing illegal. I don't have anything to worry about. I don't think about the bodies." He leans forward on the patio's low fence, staring at the mountains.

His voice drops to confessional, "I do go back and forth, across the border to visit my cousin and my uncle. Nothing touches me," he brushes off his shirt for emphasis.

Tell him, now, right now: "I'm actually more interested in someone I read about in the news, Diana. Have you heard of her? The bus killer?"

He laughs again from deep in his stomach, opening his arms wide, "Shoot! Do I know her?" Try not to show how your heart's rhythm has increased. "I've seen her. I was walking back from the pharmacy with my cousin. His house is on the 4A route."

The woman with the blonde streaks in her hair returns to your vision. She's approaching, sweating from the dance floor. She sneaks behind the man you're talking to and grabs him by the waist.

"I heard you, Javier," she wags a finger towards his nose and then turns her head to you.

Still addressing him, she winks at you, "who are you teasing tonight, Javi? Are you fishing for women to run away with *and* telling lies about that Diana killer?" She looks at

you, “I’m Laura,” extending her small hand to yours, adding, “Javier is my husband,” rolling her eyes in his direction.

Tell her your name. Though you hate her for her arms around Javier’s waist, though you hate the rubber packets of protection that will stay in your purse tonight, think about the pink cross in the desert, *Laura*.

Laura scowls at Javi, “are making up things about the Diana killer and telling them to this girl?” She flicks her hair and lets out a disgusted breath, “You didn’t see anything. You saw a blonde woman waiting for the 4A bus and that night it was all over the news. Do you know how many women in Juárez bleach their hair, Javi? Plus,” she pulls her arms around his waist tighter, “that should be a warning. I don’t like you going back over there with the cartels, and now the lady killer.”

When Courtney first told you about Juárez, she’d been living in El Paso for only two weeks, only crossed the border a couple of times, when she saw her first dead body. She didn’t tell you why or how. She said she didn’t want to go into the details.

After she’d lived in El Paso for six months the day labor center gave her a few vacation days and Courtney decided to visit San Francisco. She said she’d stay with you in NoPa rather than with your parents in Pacific Heights.

“Screw the view, I want you,” she sang over the phone as, together, you made plans to roll out the air mattress, brunch in Noe Valley and get plastered somewhere between the Mission and Castro.

“Actually,” she confessed as you both lay on your bed ditching your plans and watching downloaded episodes of HBO’s *Girls*, “I’m not sure if I can handle everything out there yet,” she gestured in the direction of the window, “the clubs, the fifteen-dollar breakfasts,

your parents. It's just so different than El Paso. I can't do it like I used to."

On the paused computer screen, Hanna, the main girl of *Girls*, had just tested positive for a strain of HPV and Jessa, the sidekick-wild-girl of *Girls*, had comforted Hanna with the words, "all adventurous women do." That night, you and Courtney found a blog for *Girls* fans with tattoos of the line "all adventurous women do," testimonials from women who allowed that spunky permanent ink on their most intimate body parts. You both joked about getting matching tattoos with the same words, but then Courtney sighed:

"Living over there," she'd rested back on her elbows, "you can't be adventurous. Not like that." She pointed at the screen.

"Everyone is so scared."

Remember how when you and Courtney sat on your bed in your NoPa apartment with *Girls* paused on your computer screen, she told you how the streets of Juárez emptied at night, everyone too afraid to go out.

"So dark," she told you, "every shadow seems to be an invitation from death."

"But come on," you told her, "You're really O.K. You're adventurous, remember? Nothing can touch you."

"I wish I knew that," she tucked her knees between her arms.

"At least you're living," you tossed yourself on to your pillows, spreading your arms towards your polished-oak ceilings, "you're so interesting and I'm so goddamned normal." Just then you imagined yourself walking down dark shadowed streets, strong and adventurous. All adventurous women do. You began to desire that feeling—to walk with the invitation from death. You began to grow a secret inside you.

Laura now gestures with one hand up and down as if listing off points in a presenta-

tion, the other hand slightly tugging on Javier's short hair with each point she hits: "Why go back and forth all the time to a place where they have to stop their serial killers with more serial killers? It's no place for a person like you, no place for a person at all." She then slips into Spanish. You can't help but stop listening. Look at the mountains turning black as the sun cowers behind them.

As Laura's words become faster and her hands move vertically in shorter, angrier spurts Javi begins to chuckle, a smile cracks across Laura's hardened face. He turns and kisses her. Do not remember how you watched Javi dance or how you imagined the night would end.

Listen now to your father telling an older man from Louis' family, "Man, in the 60's I did everything you could do that wasn't injected with a needle."

Your father waits for the man to respond, but begins to see that the man doesn't understand. Instead, the man laughs and hands your dad a thick glass of *pulque*, a drink made out of the remains of the agave plant after the rest is harvested for tequila, as Courtney explained, "Looks like cum and tastes like it."

Your father smells the drink, gives it back, and turning to his beer. Laura sees the disappointed look on the *pulque* man's face, moves from Javi's arms, and invites the older man on to the dance floor. Laura dances on the patio's broken stone as a soloist given center stage uses every inch of the trailing spotlight. Her arms move in careful waves. Her hips trace seamless figure eights in the air as her feet move with every bump and curl of the music. Her eyes glance down at her body's performance. For a moment, you wish could be her. You wish you could make her stop dancing.

Javi waits until Laura and the old man dance out of hearing range and leans in close

to you, “How long are you staying?” He looks like he has a secret.

Tell him you took Friday through Wednesday off of work to spend time with Courtney and Aunt Sarah.

Javi smiles, “Let’s go find her. You have the time. I know the 4A line. Let’s really see Diana. Let’s prove it.”

Say yes. All adventurous women do.

#### 6) Lie

Tell your parents you’d rather stay the night at Courtney’s house, help clean up. The basement has a pull out couch, you and Courtney wear the same size, and Courtney has already said yes.

Find Courtney. She’s swaying against the side of the house, her arms around Louis’ neck. Between Louis and the wall, Courtney manages to stand. The newlyweds shine with the sweat of the dance floor and Courtney’s pre-curled hair is beginning to separate and frizz. Tell the grinning couple you’re too drunk and too tired to go home with your parents, they’ll just make the hangover worse. Get Courtney to laugh at this.

Louis sways with Courtney’s sudden shift of weight. She flips her wrist forward, “Of course, of course. Stay with us. Oh my god, I love you,” she looks from you to Louis.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” she pulls you in to a three-person embrace. Her damp body squeezes you, and Louis pats your back firmly. Courtney was always so strong, so compact, the kind of person who seems made of boulders and gunpowder the first time they squeeze you. Smell the hairspray and beer, moving from her sticky hair to your chin.

Let the smell and their smiles glinting as though they were slivers of the moon send you off. Catch Javi’s wink before you depart to the basement.

Shower that night, while you can still hear feet stomping and kegs dragging as Louis' family and friends finishing cleaning up. The old man with the *pulque* and a couple of his friends sing as they fold tables and sweep the porch. Hear the clinking and racket of dish-washing fade away as you slip into the bathroom. Undress.

Look at yourself in the full-length mirror behind the door. Ask yourself if you are beautiful. Find no response.

Your lightly freckled skin glows green under the white-blue of the fluorescent bulb. Think that you are already dead. Dead for a long time now. Dead after you finished college and took the job at the coffee shop because you couldn't find anything else, no matter how much you knew about Marxist theory, Feminist discourse, and Mesopotamian history. Dead since your first eight-hour shift. Dead after you quit and started nannying for your parents' friends. Dead when you changed your first diaper and hated the baby for living. Dead with the hiring call from the Silicon Valley startup to manage their office, help them sell shoes online. Wonder now if any of the flats, espadrilles, lace-ups, or loafers is made across the river. Made by women who might as well be dead.

Reach for the bin of Courtney's extra sunglasses. Pull out the imitation Chanel's. Let their bug eyes obscure your own. Clasp your bare hands in the shape of a gun. Point them at the mirror, the other side of the river, the other side of yourself, alive for the first time in a long time. As alive as a small girl putting on her mother's oversized shoes.

## 7) Dress

Wake up with your heart beating heavily, the alarm chirping next to your head. A slight tremor moves through your body.

As you dress from the bags of clothes to give away Courtney and Louis have stored in

the basement, move your hands over Courtney's coral dress, over the cream summer sweater, the one she wore on the weekends when she wanted to "look happy." You want to slip them on so you can feel the hot air move about your freshly shaven legs and skip between your thighs, so you stand out, stand out to the huntress. You want their brightness to make Javi look at you longer than he is supposed to, get embarrassed, have to remember his wife at home, asleep. Though you want to wear them so you might feel a little more dangerous, a little braver—don't.

Instead, remember what Courtney told you about the space reserved in her closet for crossing the border. The Juárez shelf.

"I do the drive alone," she whispered to you on the phone after she told you she couldn't tell your mothers.

"I can't stand out. If that's even possible for a *gringa*." When she used to cross the border every week, she wore a big tee-shirt, "one of the free extra-larges from the charity 5-K runs."

Over her curved, muscular legs, she pulled up her, "old jeans from the 90s, flared legs, extra inches around the ass and thighs, you know the look." Her laugh over the phone twisted with a digital twinge.

"I don't really comb my hair or even—I know it's morbid—but I found a pack of the ugliest underwear in a sale bin at Wal-Mart, really ugly, beige, goes all the way up to my bellybutton. I wear them just in case anything were to happen. I like to think that maybe how bad they look, maybe that's my last defense."

8) Cross

Wait on the porch step for Javi to pick you up. 5:30 am. Just as you had agreed: get out while everyone is still asleep. Make it across in time for a full day, in time to get back across the border before dark.

"So really, why Diana?" You ask Javi after you slide into the passenger side of his matchbox-sized pick up, painted a light blue that will match the sky in a few hours. For now, the sky blushes an excited pink as if it knows what you and Javi are up to.

Brush your palms, already hot and sweaty, on the skinny jeans with hems precisely falling at your ankles. The jeans pinch your hips, still stretching to fit your body. That morning as you dressed in the cool and quiet basement you remembered Courtney and pulled on a light black sweater, baggy, not hugging like the jeans your legs strain inside.

Javi laughs at your question and looks at you as if he can see right through the black fiber of your sweater, right through to the solar plexus, right to your secret.

"What's in it for you?" He smiles, looping his pointer finger in the air, deflecting the question to you as he pushes his foot to the gas pedal. Instead of answering, watch the buildings fan by the car window all the recognizable signs for food, clothes, signs you would recognize anywhere.

As you try to find some way to account for yourself, think of Courtney. Think of "all adventurous girls do." Try to find a way to put it into words, an answer that suffices.

"She's interesting. Diana's the only thing that's interesting," you find yourself saying.

Javi laughs in a way that says he thinks you have no idea why you're here and turns the truck on to Paisano Drive. The frustration rises, frustration with yourself, at your inability to put your desire into words. You want to say that you're here because you want some one to raise their eyebrows when they hear your name. You want them to think, "all adventurous

girls do.” You want your place in those words, but to say it out loud would make it all fall flat. You know that and it seems that Javi does too. Your jeans dig into your sides and your cheeks shine as pink as the sky.

Snap back at Javi with the only thing you have, “Well, why you? Don't we both need reasons?” He smirks. The car breaks.

Look up. The border. You're already there.

You've entered the line of cars waiting, all waiting for your turn. You can see the morning traffic line trailing as if it were a jeweled pathway up to the gates bending and twinkling through the still-dim streets. A baby cries from the window of the tan car next to yours, the mother hushes the backseat in words you don't understand. A woman, hair pulled back reads, book resting on the steering wheel, the rosary beads in her car swing back and forth as the car starts and stops. Two men laugh together, gesturing with their hands. A boy in a tank top bobs his head to some unknown beat from his white ear buds, but he can't seem to stop looking behind and to the side of him.

Javi turns to you, “I don't like the men Diana kills,” thumping his thumbs against the steering wheel as if even speaking the violent men's existence out loud agitates him.

“So macho. Big tough guys who think they can do anything. They bother small guys too, you know. Any way you're different, they think you need to suck their dick about it. Like you owe them something. They're the kind of guys you can find anywhere, but here there's no one watching, no one to stop them. I like Diana because she's trying to stop them, no, better she's scaring them.”

He pauses and smiles, “My answer is better than yours.” He winks, “I didn't want to make you jealous.” But then his face changes, the smiling creases stiffen and he sighs from

the same place his laughs arise from.

“I also have a friend over there, in Juárez,” Javi says, his eyes looking straight ahead, straight across the border, “maybe we’ll go see him. He almost has his visa. Very close. A friend of my cousin David. That’s how we met. Maybe we’ll stop by the pharmacy where he works. A pharmacist in Juárez is better off than most in Juárez, but those men bother him too. Alejandro, my friend, he won’t give them pharmaceuticals under the sly like they want. He also doesn’t act like them. He makes them mad. So we’re trying to get him out, get him away,” he inches the car forward and looks at you.

“I love him like a brother,” he laughs, “hell, if Alejandro was a woman, I’d be like,” he raises his head and almost yells to the sky above the blue truck’s ceiling, “Sorry Laura! I’d marry him tomorrow.”

He becomes quiet again and says, “I would feel better if I knew Diana was real, for Alejandro, that she’s watching over him and all the ladies of the *maquillas*. I want to have proof they’re safe until we get Alé out, maybe I’ll hang her photo next to his. She is my *Santa Muerte*, my Saint Death. Today we’ll pilgrimage to her. Even if we don’t find her, I think she’ll know. I’ll sleep better at night.”

Trucks, SUVs, and a few sedans make the lines in front of, behind, and beside Javi’s small truck. A few cars shine in an unusual light, the just-washed paint and a chrome glint. You can’t help but wonder who is behind the tinted glass, a factory owner, a drug dealer, one of the crazed imitators who just wants to kill anyone in a land without rules? Feel you want to get out of the car, grab the gun you do not own and break the sparkling glass, you want to see who is on the other side.

As the truck moves forward through the line, you can see out over the bridge to the

river below. The water runs low, just a puddle in a concrete basin. Soda cans and potato chip wrappers drift between the two countries.

In the distance, a green outlined building with cream walls looks as though it were a slice of layered cake placed on a busy street corner, not something that could hold guns or bullet holes, as you imagined every building would look. Rather than a border, it seems as if El Paso just stretches across the river continuing the same streets, smattered with signs in English and Spanish. A sign to your right reads Border Parking. Across the river palm trees stick out from between the low buildings as though they were heads looking over the scene, making sure it's safe.

Javi weaves the truck through the mess of white poles that make a pathway towards the border guard. The poles seem placed almost at random, almost as natural as cacti in the desert, almost as though they were white crosses in the desert. You can feel the heat of the day beginning to seep through the truck's frame. The day is starting. This day. Your day is starting.

Green arrows point the truck forward. The border guard sips his coffee as he looks at your passport, types into his computer. Javi speaks to him, though you don't understand. Let their friendly tones sooth your stomach that began to churn when the first car pulled up behind Javi's truck, sealing its place in the long border line. "Feliz viaje" the border guard smiles as he hands back your passport. Happy trip. Javi almost sings, "we will." Feliz viaje.

Turn your head to look back at your country peering at you from the twin mouths of the border's bridge. Twin tongues of road recoiling back, upwards, over the river, but in the middle of those two paths stands a large cross at least ten feet high, nailed to the border gate. In black paint the name *JUANA* crawls over the cross. Flowers pile high around the base,

white and red with green stems. Teddy bears rest between the flowers, clutching heart pillows as if they are stuffed guards. Your country rests safely behind the river. No, it will not help. Know it will not help.

*Bienvidos a Mexico. Welcome to Mexico. Camino. Walkway. Walk this way.*

#### 9) Wait

As the truck enters this new city, you feel as though you've stepped through Alice's looking glass. You're entering a mirror world where signs read: *Gateway to Juárez Mexico, Downtown Convention Center, Tourist Information*. Nothing looks dangerous. You feel almost disappointed as billboards reach for you: *Màs Sabor*. From the truck's windows you can see the city buildings in the distance giving away to low houses, simple walls, tin roofs, gaping doors. Then you spot another cross stuck on a corner: *Donde Estan?* Where are they?

"Let's go to Tío Gabriel's first," Javi says. "I just want to say hello while we're here." You nod. What else can you do? You're in his hands now.

Crates of vegetables stacked under awnings line the sidewalk. Glowing under the blue, green, and orange of tarps you see mangos, oranges, juicers, flip-flops, suitcases, and barrels of rice. As the truck waits at an intersection you notice that the bars on the street floor windows seem more like trellises for creeping vines than for protection. Two cops spin by on bicycles. Could this be the place in your dreams? What are you so afraid of?

Javi notices you watching the policemen and points, "A few years back, when the cartels didn't like the police commissioner, they said they would kill one police officer for each day he still held his office."

You imagine the days of a calendar piling up as bodies in front of a government building. You try to imagine the bodies of the bicycle cops included. No matter how you try,

you can't.

“What happened?” you ask.

“I stopped paying attention,” Javi sighs. “I didn't want to know. But I do know that I wouldn't want to wear that uniform. But the police say everything is getting better. Murder is down from ten per-day to five. Feel safer?”

You can tell Javi is familiar with the streets as he navigates the truck. You idle next to a glass-windowed cart piled high with potato chips. A vendor squeezes a lime into a plastic bag full of greasy chips covered in red powder grasped in a waiting girl's hands. Her father watches on, his hand on her shoulder, a little tight as he looks up and down the street.

You see fire in a barrel on a corner, taxis, lettered signs spelling words you will never understand. You recognize some, though: dental, repair, tasty. Restaurant kitchens glow from windows framed by neon lights, Laundromat trucks roll in front of you. You notice women moving in tight groups along the sidewalk, always together. At one corner a woman sits under a tarp flipping tortillas on a wide flat stove, pots of beans, shredded meat, and mashed greens bubble around her. *Alto*, the stop signs command.

You see an older woman with brick-red hair pulling a blue wire shopping basket down the sidewalk, bags piled into their gridded metal. The more you watch the streets and sidewalks, everything seems to be behind a cage. The car's almost invisible glass window seems to feel so exposed, so clear, so few bars between you and the world outside.

The truck turns onto a road blocked by a wall with peeling cream-colored paint and a black iron gate. Javi drives the car up to the gate, stops the car and swipes a key card through a small machine. The gate opens and you see a line of small houses, simple one and two-story adobe-style structures in varying shades of white, tan, orange, and pink. As you pull

into a driveway of a one-story cream yellow house with a makeshift carport extended towards the street, a round man in a baseball cap emerges from the carport's shadows. He looks at Javi's face and smiles, stretching his thick black mustache over his upper lip. As Javi steps out of the car, the man takes off his hat and lets out a laugh that sends his arms down to his knees. Stay in the car. Through the driver's side window, you can hear him say something you guess as, "What a surprise!" You see the man grasp Javi's shoulders and you imagine him saying, "Let's have a look at you."

Javi signals for you to get out of the car. He introduces the man to you as his Tío Gabriel. His uncle's face begins to harden, the smile fades into his mouth as he begins speaking to Javi in fast Spanish. You can tell from his tone his hand gestures he's asking about you. You see Javi try to explain why you're both here. You hear her name, Diana. Tío Gabriel's eyes widen. His Spanish quickens and the volume rises to a yell. Javi stops him and looks at you. He mutters something to Tío Gabriel and he pauses. He looks at you, smiles, and gestures toward the door to his house. Both he and Javi show you inside. They both point you towards a purple couch.

Javi's only words are, "We'll be outside."

Don't follow them. You can't understand the shouting anyway. You took Latin in high school, but that doesn't help. Stay in the living room, dark and sticky with heat. When a small woman enters quietly on the brown shag carpet and jumps when she sees you just say, "Javier," and point your eyes in the direction of the carport.

Wait for her to listen to the shouting men and watch her face pull downwards, her eyes roll and her head slowly shake back and forth. Listen to her sigh and begin a conversation with the ceiling, as her hands gesturing upwards as if she's pleading with God. Know

that she is praying, but not for you.

Watch her muttering hands lead her to the kitchen where she pulls a can of soda from the fridge. Notice, just beyond the door, the corner of an aquarium. See through the green water the dark shadow of a turtle, softball-sized, peering out at you from the glass. Watch the small reptile pawing at the glass, trying and trying to reach you.

10) Enter

Javi comes back inside and says, “We can leave the truck here. You ready?” He explains that you can walk to the bus stop. You follow him around the corner and before you can even register the main street, you see Javi running after a white bus with the letters, Linea 4 written on the back. As he waves his arms. Javi shouts back to you, “We can catch this one.” You have no time to think. You run after him. The bus looks more like a school bus, white with two stripes running down the sides, thick blue and a thin yellow. It lurches to a stop. Javi waits for you. Notice other people running for the bus as well.

The doors open with a pressurized wheeze. Feel the hot rush of air. Move forward, it’s all you can do amidst the bodies who brush up against you while Javi’s hand guides your back, presses pocket-hot pesos into your sweating palm. When you get up the stairs, before you slip the coins in the machine, look straight at him, straight at the driver. Notice his spotted face. Age spots, freckles, moles make up his sweating, regular human face. You expected him to exude monstrosity, yelling at the passengers, painting his fantasies on the women with his ceaselessly gazing eyes. But if it weren’t for his placement, his spot in the driver’s seat of this Linea 4 bus with his hands on the large rubber wheel, you wouldn’t have noticed anything unusual about his receding hairline, his stomach spilling over his belt. He could have been anyone, anywhere: San Francisco, El Paso, Courtney’s party, but he is here, driving this

bus. Because of that, you hate him.

You would like to think that you're a new kind of passenger on this white-painted bus that lurches forward before you've found your seat as if it were a cannon pushing you through the air, pushing you up over the bus, out of its sputtering pathway, but you fall into a woman, her wrists loaded with cloth shopping bags. She breaks your fall, just as Javi grabs your arm.

You sit on the bus together, the leather rubs under your jeans and makes a suffocated sound of squirming each time you adjust your legs. You push forward to the the next stop. You note that all the passengers wave to hail the bus. They know Linea 4. They know where it goes. You realize for the first time that you're on her radar. She's probably been here and you feel hope that a connection has been finally stitched between you. You share the path the bus draws through the streets, the heat of the sun pushing through the windows, the hot rubber seats, the women in white and blue short-sleeved uniforms. In this whole moment, the bus feels as though it is yours and it is also all hers. "The next stop is Alé's pharmacy," Javi says, grasping the chair in front of him. The bus has been slowed by traffic that seems to stretch for blocks ahead. You see the sign, *Farmacas Similares* far in the distance, you can almost make out underneath: *Los mismo, perdo mas barato*. Under the pharmacy's awning you see a person in a large mascot costume, waving in stiff-armed circles. He's a white-haired, mustached man in a lab coat. Javi points to him, "Dr. Simi, get it?"

The bus moves slowly through the traffic. Two blocks away from the pharmacy, the bus stops to pick up more passengers. At first you don't see who enters. You're looking out the window, your vision blurred, thinking about all the people you've encountered, today: Javi, his aunt, and screaming uncle. You're thinking about how all of them could collide here

on this bus, on this street, but then Javi grabs your forearm. The intensity of his hold, anything but affectionate harder, is than anything you've felt before. His grasp compresses your bones in its quickness. He pushes your arm into your side, a rapid movement you only know from the movies when a bomb goes off or a gun is fired. It's the instinct in people to cover each other. His grasp is animal in its quickness.

As you look up you see blonde hair, the sun glinting off of a pair of sunglasses with the bug eyed designer curve. You don't see her face, but your heart seems to stop as your skin turns to ice. Everything around you becomes quiet. You notice everyone on the bus has become quiet. You don't realize until now that everyone on the bus has been thinking about Diana, knows about Diana, is waiting for her. Until then, you felt like she was your secret, your desire to see her, to know her was yours and yours alone, but now you see you're wrong. You can't understand what the bus driver says to her, but in a few moments, Javi will translate:

The bus driver says, "Are you going to kill me?"

She answers with a question, "Are you afraid of me?"

The driver says, "Yes."

She replies, "Good," and hands him her bus fare.

The woman moves along, pushing her way through the rows. You see two shopping bags dangling from her wrists. You realize that she's not Diana, but she knows who Diana is. She used the fear of her.

Both you and Javi seem to begin to breathe at once as the bus doors breath themselves shut and the bus continues to crawl through the traffic toward the *Farmacias Similares* and its waving lab coated mascot. You can feel your heart beating so loudly that you fear it will

burst. Javi releases his hand from your forearm and you realize your hands are shaking and no matter how you try to spread out your fingers you can't hold them still, so you grasp your hands tightly around your knees.

#### 11) Stay

A large crowd of passengers in front of the pharmacy waves the bus down. A group of teenage boys share ear buds. Three older women with purses slung in the bend of their arms, a mother with four children. The trembling seems detached from your body as though your hands were someone else's limbs. The tremble comes from somewhere deep inside you, an animal instinct that wants to leap out of the bus and run, to race back the bus line's route, the ghosts of the blue truck's path, across the snaking lines of traffic filtering across the river to someplace more home. The walls seem small and you feel larger and whiter, as though your skin glows announcing something to everyone who passes you and you don't know what it says because you cannot translate the message. All you know is that you thought you had a window, a screen between you and here. You had a border, but you will bleed if shot, will turn to bone in the desert.

As the bus finally begins to stammer toward the pharmacy, you sink back into your seat, you can feel your tendons tense, a heat rising in your chest. But what can you do but wait? As the bus is about to pass the pharmacy, the group waiting in front of Dr. Simi waves again. The women lift their purses, the boys rip out one earbud and begin to shout. Javi begins to talk about Alé, "I wonder if he's here. Either way we won't get out, not after that. We'll just ride it all the way back to Tío's stop. It's too bad, coming all this way." Javi clicks his tongue as the boys plunk their pesos into the till. The bus is filling up and they have to push back shopping bags and shoulders to make it to scattered seats. One takes hold of a

metal pole. As you watch, he puts his earbud back in and you strain to hear the beat of his music.

You feel Javi shoot up and out of his seat. Before you can turn to look up you hear him saying, “Oh no, oh no.” Feel the cotton fabric of his shirt press into your face and smell the quick punch of department store cologne. Try to push yourself up to follow him. Push past shoulders. Hit your knee on another knee. Try to hear Javi. Try to hear what he’s quickly saying as you push towards his shirt and jeans. “Dangerous men are in the pharmacy,” he yells behind him, “I need to get to Alé.”

You trip over a plastic bag. You hear something break, an arm catches your fall, and you hear Javi shouting behind him, “Stay on the bus!”

“No!” You shout, “No!”

“I’ll meet you right here! In an hour when you turn around.” The doors close.

The bus lurches. You hear the pieces of what your knee has broken clink inside the plastic bag as the bus shoots forward. The hand holding your shoulder is tight. The bus is silent. Above the hum of the engine you can finally hear the muffled beat through the boy’s earbuds. Look up. Know everyone is watching you. Know the driver could have let you off the bus. He didn’t have to close those doors. He’s seen you.

Look up at the wrinkled thin fingers grasped to your shoulder, long fingernails, a light yellow knit sweater. A woman’s voice says something to you, but you don’t understand. Look down at your knees resting in the remains of a terra-cotta pot inside a plastic shopping bag. The bag is woven plastic and the sharp triangles of pottery haven’t pierced it or your jeans. The woman’s pressure is still strong. Pull yourself up. You know enough to say, “Gracias,” and she nods her head toward the empty seat next to her, but she doesn’t smile. You feel as

though you've made an uneven exchange. She's given you her arm and pots so you do the only thing you know to do. Reach into your purse. The shaking feels almost natural at this point, as though you've lived with this tremor your whole life. Reach your fingers into the wallet you'd promised yourself you'd keep out of sight in a small purse slung around your shoulder and held tight around your lap, holding it firmly as the guidebooks taught.

Pull out a twenty dollar bill, hand it to the woman and smile as you slide into the seat next to her. She doesn't smile back, but she doesn't frown. You feel as if she hasn't done you a favor, but fulfilled an obligation.

Javi might be at the pharmacy when the bus loops back. If it loops back. If you're on it. Tell yourself that you must keep this seat. If you can keep this seat, you'll make it back. You feel the heat of tears forcing themselves out, but you feel that now more than ever in your life you can't show you're upset. You cannot show you're lost. You pick a small spot on the bus's window, where dirt and grime have caught someone's loose hair. Watch that spot. Do not think about your mother's voice. Do not remember the bed you and Courtney lay on and imagined the future, how you would give anything to be where you felt safe. Instead concentrate on that small space of window. Watch how the light changes as the bus starts and stops.

Try not to feel the emptiness that surrounds you when the woman with the yellow sweater, the broken terra-cotta pots, and your twenty dollar bill exits the bus. Do not think. Do not think.

Do not think when the bus slows down. Do not lift your head when the doors open, when you hear a shot so loud you feel as though it has replaced your heart, as though you've

lost your skin. Your ears will ring. Do not look up. You don't need to know she's here. You know she's found you.

## 12) Know

Lift your head up. Look at the bus driver's body slumped to the left window. The blood makes the scene dark as if it were under a gnarled tree's shadow. Know that there is nothing between you and the bus driver. He and you stand on one side of a border and Diana on the other. Notice the light spray of blood on your sweater. You didn't know blood could travel so far.

## Part One:

### Book of Margaret

#### 1) Elliot's Disappearance

*[In this section Margaret, a huntress, discovers Elliot, her newspaper delivery man and a writer, has left to a beach town, Sands by the Sea, to work on his book. Margaret begins to cope with Elliot's absence.]*

Elliot's absence has proved a nuisance. I noticed Elliot had gone because of the newspaper. I opened my front door to morning fog hugging the stoop. My feet lingered between the threshold's ice and the entryway's warm stone. The unraveling threads of my doormat met me instead of the usual fresh pressed morning pages. I looked out into the mist and could see a soggy lump of inky pulp between my walkway and the main road. I wondered how many hours the paper had waited in the dewy grass.

I wanted nothing less than to leave the full coffee cup by my armchair, but I was curious to see what the day's articles would reveal about Professor Archer's disappearance. Her story had taken up the past two weeks of front pages: a half-crazed professor who kept her job mostly because of her reputation—the funds that poured in because of it—ran away, went missing. The police and the school searched the rivers, lakes, and forests, but found nothing. They even asked to search my game park. I let them, but I knew they wouldn't find anything. I know each square foot of that land, and I can tell when anything changes.

The day the police came looking for her body—I don't know why they assumed it was a body—I knew first by the dogs, the metal snapping of their collars against their leashes, pulling the police forward. I knew with all of their searching they would run my game to the outer edges of the fences. I don't keep big game, just deer, small fowl, some boars, wild goats, and turkeys. When the chief officer's brass-buttoned arm handed me the papers war-

ranting a search of my park, I learned that all open spaces, national, state, and city parks within a one hundred mile radius were all subject to a search. Apparently Dr. Archer fed enough university grants and endowments that they weren't going to give up.

They came to search my park in the morning. I remember it as the kind of morning that glowed yellow and misty and later would give into a sky the color of robin's eggs. It would have been a good day for a hunt, but as soon as I let the officers into my gates, I knew the hunting would be scarce, even cancelled for a few days, however long it took to wash away the scent of dog spit and foreign boots. So I tried to get as much information as I could, to perhaps know more than the papers the next day. I asked a younger-looking officer, hopefully greener than the others, why they thought she might be here.

"She was wild," he shrugged and turned to his dog. Another officer turned to me, "She was so wild she might just seek out a dark place like this." I leaned on one of my fence's poles, asking, "You think she'd climb this?"

"It might be a safer cage," he said, putting his hands in his pockets, slouching into a relaxed pose.

"My guess is we won't find her, but I'm told we can't think like that." His cheeks radiated bright red from the morning cool, "We're not supposed to operate like we won't find her. I don't know. I guess I believe she's gone into thin air?" He seemed to notice he'd begun to ramble and caught himself.

"Oh sorry," he said as if coming out of a trance. "Not protocol at all. Sorry to gab to you. You just seem like a good person to talk to." I tried to smile.

"Go on," I said and closed the gate behind him, as he moved to join the other officers inside the park. It had happened again. People have a strange way of telling me too much,

telling me everything, as if I want to listen. As if I want nothing else.

They didn't find her. And ever since, the park felt quiet, quiet in a way that made it difficult to go home at the end of the day. I wanted to linger in that silence.

But the morning Elliot left, I was at home and nothing sounded better than sitting with a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper. So, I heaved on my workboots, pulled my overcoat around my shoulders and stepped into the gray freeze.

The damp paper tore in my hands as I tried to pick it up. I knew I would have to let it rest by the fire before I could examine what was left of it. It seemed strange for Elliot to break his five-year habit of walking quietly up my steps in the morning dark, placing the paper just at the door's edge, headlines turned towards me, so I could read them as soon as I looked down. He knew details. I could give him that. But what had happened that day? I wondered if perhaps Professor Archer's disappearance was a contagion that had swallowed Elliot up as well. I laughed at the thought. No. I suspected not.

I turned to go back inside, soggy paper in hand. I noticed a flash of color on my windowsill. I jumped at the brightness of it. When you own your own house and tend to it, you become accustomed to its exact image your memory. Any sudden change becomes a transgression as if the whole property were rebelling against you. As I drew closer I realized the flake of color belonged to a red envelope resting on the window ledge.

Like the paper, the envelope was damp and the sealing glue gummy from its time resting against the glass. My name curled over the front in slanted letters I knew well.

The letter could be from no one but Elliot . I knew why he wrote the letter on red paper. Always a symbol. Everything had to have a meaning within a meaning. I opened it in the

cold, not wanting to make a scene or give it any more breaths than necessary. I tore open envelope and pulled out the writing paper of the same red color.

*Margaret,*

*I am leaving for Sands by the Sea. The lost boys think a new place will clear my head. Walking by the sea just might bring characters to the empty rooms that haunt my new book. I will always be thinking of you, as you are what brings the words to me. I will return as soon as the pages begin to take shape. Michael will deliver the paper in my place. Forgive him. He is not as careful as me.*

*All my love,*

*Elliot*

At first, the red shock of the envelope came as a relief. I had endured four years of knocks at my door, bags of pages, and sometimes just a blank page and a pen accompanied by a pleading look in Elliot 's eyes. I always invited him in, unable to turn away the rain-soaked writer. He wasn't anything like the beasts I hunted or the hunters I led. There was no way to compare my two lives. With the hunters, I looked forward to leading them quietly through the brush. With Elliot , I somehow led him through his pages, but I dreaded all of it. The hunters understood the gravity of the task at hand, the exchange of life they are always about to make. They enter the park as equals with the game. They are prepared to be hunted and if caught, wish their bodies would be used to their fullest extent. Elliot would never sign up for such an exchange.

Instead he took everything he could. He knew the path to my door, the time I returned from each hunt, the time I went to bed, the time he could capture me tired enough to open my

front door and let him dry his coat and boots in the hall. And always as if by instinct, I handed him hot chocolate the way I do with first time-hunters whose hands tremble when they see the hide cut away from the tendons.

When I took over the game park, I didn't do anything to help the rookies at first. I figured they would have to get used to what hunting meant, but a steady-handed regular named Tom suggested I do something to ease the fear, to at least bring the new customers back. The next week, as we strung a carcass on a line and began to let the blood out in a salty stream to a bucket below, I wondered if something sweet like hot chocolate might counteract the salt, grime, and fur. Tom pointed to a green-faced friend of a regular sitting the back corner of the shed, seeming to not know whether to leave or stay. The rookie drank the chocolate, and his hands steadied. The sweetness helped him swallow the death before him.

On later hunts, I brought bars of chocolate in my jacket pocket and would slip dark squares into the hunters' hands, out of their friends' sight. Newcomers returned more often after that, although some I never saw again. "Killing is not for everyone," I would say as I pushed steaming cups of chocolate under their noses.

On those nights Elliot came to my door, I felt my hands pouring heavy cream, spooning heaps of dark powder into a cup and listening as he told me about his writing that day, hands trembling. I didn't love him like I loved the hunters. I listened, unspeaking. While I read, he watched me and wrote.

Yet strangely, the day I received the letter in the crimson envelope, after I read it's curling letters, I put the envelope and paper in my sweater pocket, went to the kitchen, forgetting the coffee and heated the heavy cream, spooned the dark powder into a cup and sat in my reading chair, inhaling the sweetness, trying to forget the salt in the air.

I continued through the silence that took hold of the next days and weeks, returning home in the evenings and in the early mornings after a night hunt, washing off the dirt and settling into my armchair. Silence wrapped me up as I opened a book. Silence allowed me to sink into its pages, losing time and myself in the most familiar and comforting of ways. I settled into my quiet routine. Sometimes I spent entire days without speaking, and when someone finally came to my door or I went out to buy spinach, tomatoes, bunches of basil and blood oranges, I would hear my own dusty voice creak out a thank you, and it seemed so weak in comparison to the voice that had been slowly growing inside me in the quiet of Elliot's absence, a voice of thick resin, stickiness and sound, a voice of my own amidst the silence.

But loneliness soon arrived in shape shifting waves. There was first the loneliness at night, the loneliness of falling asleep with only the sound of my own breathing. In the dark, I would think about the slim chance of dying that night and how I would not have a witness. I do not like the fact that I want a witness, but the loneliness made it clear I wanted one anyway. I couldn't deny it.

There was the loneliness of making food for myself. Tomatoes, sliced cheese, green leaves drizzled in oil, all in the height of the ripe season and knowing, too, that I was its only witness and it didn't seem to be enough. There was the loneliness of turning off a light and having to warn no one. And the worst kind of loneliness was the kind I felt when surrounded by people out on walks and errands, but knowing I would prefer to return home to all the other shapes of loneliness, rather than in the midst of unknowing witnesses. The kind of witnesses who don't know what they're seeing, who don't nod back, who never say, "I saw." At least Elliot, in all his pestering and annoyance, made some kind of noise back. He had given me something to occupy myself with as I moved through each day. I began to wonder if I had

always been grasping for something completely impossible and unknowable, something made of air.

## 2) Margaret Searches Elliot's Apartment

*[Elliot has been gone for some time without any word to Margaret or his writing colleagues. A writer and friend of Elliot, Guillaume, asks Margaret to search for him. She begins her hunt at Elliot's apartment. In the apartment she finds a box of his writing. This section describes the moment Margaret finds the box.]*

I found the box, silver with leather corners, resting on Elliot's writing desk. Books, loose paper, and opened letters covered the desk's finely polished surface. The wood, left untouched by paper at the desk's exposed corners glinted a warm wink of gold in the afternoon sun. The box rested still and almost invisible amidst the mess as though it were a buck caught in plain sight of a hunter, making its last attempt at blending into the trees before it bolts, a little ashamed, a little thrilled. But I caught it.

I pushed away the letters and books, sliding the metal rectangle to the edge of the desk towards me. A padlock kept it closed, but I wanted to open it and I knew I had the right tools at home. Whether by a swift blow with a hammer or a hot incision by a soldering iron, I knew I could open it. I tried to ease the box into my arms, but I had to put it down. Too heavy to lift on my own, I wondered if there were more than just drafts inside the silver container.

## 3) What Margaret Finds in the Box

*[Inside the box Margaret finds entries from Elliot's journal. Some are included below. These entries will reveal more information about the dangerous nature of the book Elliot is setting out to write. The writing will indicate to Margaret that she needs to seek out Elliot in Sands by the Sea to ensure his safety.]*

April 4th

When I can't write, I sleep. I'm not like the other writers. When they can't write, they assemble in the evening, lay out lines of plates on polished tables filled with fruits, glazed meats, and wine held in glassware only washed in imported soaps. They call themselves "The Lost Boys." Sometimes they invite me.

As I sit at the darkest corner of the table, they talk to each other about their writing.

"My health" they say to each other across the table as they eat, "look at what the stories have done to my health." They point to their rolls of skin, the brittleness of their hair, and the veins leaping from their foreheads. To them, I am still young. I haven't written enough.

After the feast, the writers invite me to move outside to watch the stars shift and the moon descend under their wisteria-heavy trellis. Their wine turns to espresso with a lemon rind curved at the bottom of the cup. The solitary curl brings memories of their work, so they drown the rind in thick sweet limoncello and ready themselves for a sleep they know will be restless. But I suspect they all know that the tastes from their feast won't push the words out. I can only imagine how the words crawl over their bodies at night, making them shiver. No matter how alive they've been in the sunlight, in the dark, in the residue of the day, they lie still and alone with their words. I understand that.

I have such a weak stomach that at first, I only joined them now and then. I tried to be polite, meager, spreading soft cheese over a simple piece of bread and sipping one glass of wine always from a bottle I couldn't find elsewhere. And at first, before the group moved under the stars to mourn over lemon peels, I would begin my

walk home smelling the olive oil still in the air. The comfort of the empty street swallowed the party's voices and the hollow click of my feet always carried me home. The hot wind would move through the trees like an animal companion, sometimes ahead of me, sometimes behind and running to catch up.

Of course, I felt the words too. Endings arrived before beginnings. Images begged to be linked. When it got bad, I slept in the warm waters of my dreams, turning over and over for days in my soft sheets.

Early on a dark morning, the wind brushing the trees against my house, I swear I saw a black figure over my desk. Even under the layers of blankets, I felt cold. "Alright," I said. I knew what it was.

Still in my slippers, I made myself strong black tea and honey. After a look back at my desk, I added a pour from a bottle by the sink for warmth. I returned to the shadow. A thick smell of anise and cardamom made the room dense and heavy. I sat and slipped into the cold. I began.

July 10th

How delicious! Right now, I am looking out over the town from a high ridge on the way back from the house of my dearest friend and writer, Guillaume. A hazy pink has settled over the high hills. The evening's air is so lusciously warm, so sweet with the scent of a nearby lilac bush. I feel I can almost see the light purple scent rising from the drooping flowers. Everything feels sleepy, yet alive and slowly breathing, as if the whole world has just risen from a decadent nap.

I've stopped because my stomach felt empty and my legs were tired enough to rest. With luck, I found a bench that someone with foresight—as if they had antici-

pated this very moment—had placed looking over the small city in the valley below. The city’s lights are just beginning to sparkle through the evening’s pink-blue haze.

I want to run back to Guillaume and say, “See Guillaume, just this into words.” But instead, I’ve opened the tin Guillaume packed for my walk home. It is a long walk, a couple of hours, but today I want it no other way. The brightly colored houses, vine-covered walls, and cobble-stoned paths provide welcome change from the harshness of white paper and the dizzying scratches of my own words.

The question Guillaume asked me earlier, seemed so difficult to answer, and now it is so clear: “What you have to figure out, Elliot, is why you write?” I would just take him here and point to everything around me.

But Guillaume has taken care of me. When I popped open the silver tin he made for me, I couldn’t help but breathe out the sigh of a person in the care of a friend who knows him well. In the tin, I found a simple meal: hard white cheese and crisp white crackers, and a large bottle of beer, cold enough that condensation remained on the brown glass. The warm, full-bodied breeze leapt around me as I nibbled the cheese, delightfully bitter, and the crackers salty and bold.

September 23<sup>rd</sup>

When I walked to Margaret’s house, my feet seemed to make little sound on the rain-soaked road. An uneasy feeling arose in my stomach. The quiet made me wonder if even sound were turning to air, but I could see the light of Margaret’s house in the distance and it comforted me.

On my walk, I imagined how Margaret would scowl and sigh from deep in her chest when she saw me. She would let me in and put the kettle on the stove. Her

hands—red, cracked and perfect—would move the flaked chocolate from the screw-top jar to the two cups. As she sits across from me, her black hair would close around her down-turned eyebrows, her body clenched like a fist and I would start to tell her about my writing. Finally, I would get to tell her how my hands have dipped into the story's new dark well and have come up with only air. She will begin to uncurl.

I would move closer to her as I tell her how the first few pages moved so speedily, the words gliding onto the page with patience and a crystal grace. I would brush her diamond-drop earring for emphasis. I will push myself and her onto the floor, move her close to the wooden boards, to show her how the story unrolled so easily like a rug on a newly polished floor.

Between sweet sips of our drinks, as we lie close, our bodies and cups touching, I will confess I don't know where I've started in the story, where I'm writing from, beginning, middle, or end? My pages so far tell of the exquisite lands and rooms I have created for weeks, but it is all empty—not a person to be found. When I started to write, I felt as though I could taste the pages, as I taste the salted blood of tender red meat at the end of a well-spent day, but some prying fingers pulled the meaty gristle out of my mouth and now I'm empty and hungry. I can still taste the metal.

I will tell her how this morning, I woke to the sound of heavy rain and a desire for chocolate.

Later, September 23<sup>rd</sup>

Margaret is nowhere. I tapped lightly on her glass-paneled front door, her home concealed by the royal purple curtain on the other side of the windows. The

glass rattled in its frame over and over, but no footstep or sugary call from Margaret returned my pleading wrist. I decided to move around the house, just to be sure she's not there, looking for some clue as to where Margaret has gone or when she will return. With each window, covered in its own dark curtain, I love her a little more.

I've decided to sit on the porch and wait for Margaret. At least I know how to write about Margaret. As I look out into the empty night, the craving for chocolate persists desperately, deep in my stomach. To soothe my nerves, I imagine Margaret gently rocking back and forth in this very chair, back and forth on a summer night with a book in her lap. When I asked her why she bought the chair, she answered: "to shoot the birds."

#### 4) What Margaret finds in Sands By the Sea

*[When Margaret arrives at Elliot's beach cottage in Sands by the Sea, Elliot is still nowhere to be found. Margaret's concern grows. She searches his cottage and finds a stack of papers containing copies of letters and scraps of writing she thinks belong to Dr. Archer. Margaret begins to realize that the books that Dr. Archer and Elliot were working on at the moments of their disappearance are the same book. This new information as well as help from Elliot's neighbors send Margaret to Isle Moria, a remote island off of the coast, in search of both Elliot and Dr. Archer. Below are some of the Dr. Archer's letters (written to a mysterious "Sir") and page fragments that Margaret find in Elliot's cottage.]*

Letter 1:

Dear Sir:

Suppose I were to begin by saying that I have fallen in love with a structure. Suppose I confessed; my clean, pure hands clasping together under the gray daylight that speaks through the stone-framed window of this university. I need a lover no more than I need maps of a character's travels across pages and to mark in detail how she changes, just as the penciled notches up kitchen walls that track a child's growth. Except I am not the

mother, the sacrifice, nor the wife because to be in love with a structure is to do more than feed it or flirt with it; to let a structure into your bed is to be a kind of God.

Imagine I were to begin with an idea that came to me as I walked the damp wooded path to my desk and watched the clouds suck the peaks of the mountains into their wide mouths. Beyond the fog of my breath, I saw white moving over black, moving into black, and the black hills becoming white. I thought of the black ink that stains my hands at the end of each day, the invisible threads between letters, and their exhale into words, into forms that bleed on to my hands. Is this what I bring home each night?

What if I said I am in love with a theory about the ink on my hands, about the beginning, middle, and end of the shadows of letters and their long sighs? It's a theory for what letters wish they could be, a theory for what they dream.

Suppose I were to say this theory saves itself for a book that hasn't been written. These stone passageways, gray and straight, remind me that humans create lines out of the chaos and out there, beyond the windows, are the trees, which are beautiful, but also unforgiving like God. I first heard the voices of my footsteps clattering in my mind, telling me stories of my past and imagining my future. They didn't disappear, but they slowly mattered less. Then I began to feel the book, not open its pages and see the ink and the story, but feel its weight in my outstretched hands and as soon as I did, I knew it was from another world.

Yours,

Dr. A

Lone Page: On Offering

To know a book, you must offer. After Son of God's appearance split the bible in two, the now-called Christians had no need for burnt offerings. Before, they gave God what they held most precious: lambs, calves, even daughters. When Christ gave his life there was nothing more precious the in world he could give, or so they supposed. But that was long before the novel, long before Shakespeare's Lear, long before Melville's whale, long before Proust's madeleine dipped in lemon tea, long before you could pick up a book and have something to say about it. If the early Christians—eyes still burnt with the vision of their most precious gift on the cross—had seen our libraries, wandered to a spine that seemed to call to them, and cracked open the pages and read until they could taste the lemon tea in their mouths, feel the Madeleine crumble on the tongues, they would know that the world still needed offerings.

The world still needs offerings because when a book opens its jaws and shouts, or whispers, or confesses to you, you must speak back. You must offer. In offering, you give what is most precious, more precious than the blood of any daughter or son, no matter how holy. In offering, you answer with yourself to a book's call.

Letter 2:

Dear Sir:

You don't know that I make offerings in shadow. You don't know that night calls the book and my mind wraps the white theory against the black inky letters. The letters licking my eyes. You try to stop me with work that grinds my time, taking and talking. But my mind burns, so I offer in darkness to a book that doesn't yet feel gravity's pull. Not yet whole. I see only a horizon of fire. I don't know how to unravel the

flames completely or what I they spell, but I know to love it.

Yours,

Dr. A

#### Lone Page: Offering to a Book of Air

When the book's pages began to tickle my face, calling to me in whispers of wrinkled paper and droplets of ink, I could not clasp my hands on it or know what its pages contained. I could only know what it was and what it was not. Much like an invisible wall must be lined with something visible to be seen: paint, mud, or paper, so this book must be lined with other pages from other books. Through other texts, I will find where this book is and where it is not. Through other texts, I can see the edges of its frame. So I will lay other books, other narratives, other structures against it. I will see what sticks and offer and offer until the book speaks.

## **Part Two:**

### **Book of Elizabeth**

*[Book of Elizabeth takes place on Isle Moria, the island Margaret travels to in search of Dr. Archer and Elliot. The protagonist of this section, Elizabeth, is a key player in uncovering the mystery of the book and also the disappearances. The sections below begin to tell her story.]*

Two hundred homes perch on the island's top (and no one knows how many live in the caves). A boat comes and goes once on Saturdays, docking at nine, departing at four—always before the sun sets; the captain fears sailing passed the caves after dark.

The post office, town hall, and store fill the main road's toothy yawn. The boat fills the store's shelves, but their bareness settles again by Saturday. The island's women know to line up on Sunday mornings and fill their baskets with flour, milk, eggs, onions, almonds and sugar to survive; but also the beads to string, deep-colored threads to weave, porcelain, paints, and fine-tipped brushes—all from the mainland, all to give away.

When the waters get too cold, the waves too high, and the wind too fast, the women accept furs for their naked bodies, baskets in hand, moving from the store to the post office to collect letters and packages from their mainland connections.

The day the large box arrived, the largest delivery in the island's history, no one claimed it. No one dared take a gift. When the box started to smell, the men began to discuss who would open it.

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The women of the caves are not like the women above ground. If only the box been sent to them.

Above ground, the women do not want. The less they want and the more they give away, the more they're wanted. Before the box arrived, Elizabeth, the one the men wanted the most (the one they can't have, because she was married the next day), grew her hair out

and started to give her clothes away.

On Isle Moria, though giving is most graceful, most feminine, no woman will receive another's gifts. Taking a gift shadows a Moria household in shame. The men need no gifts. So, daily, the women walk to the beach and leave their belongings at the mouth of the caves.

Everyone had wondered about Elizabeth, her hair and her slowly unfolding nudity, until the day she stepped out of her house. Naked, unable to be clothed, due to her charity and purity of heart. She started to cut off her hair. In front of everyone, pretending to see no one, she moved the razor slowly, but too close, scraping her scalp. She bled, but didn't stop. They would all say, the ones who were there to watch, that after it was all over, she dissolved back into the house and she wasn't seen for two months. The ones who knew her best, started to say she was weaving.

The day she appeared again, they lined the streets to watch. In her outstretched arms, she carried the softest rug the town had ever felt, though none can remember touching it. She walked through the path carved by onlookers, down to the beach, naked, bald, and holding her rug of hair. She laid the rug at the edge of the cave's darkness.

After everyone had turned their backs and walked up the banks to their empty homes, a hand, in a glint of red and gold, pulled the rug into the dark.

The next day, Elizabeth married.

## Part Three:

### Book of Jack and Anna

*[Book of Jack and Anna tells the story of Jack and Anna, a couple destined to be characters in Elliot's book. They live in a world where characters wait to be written into novels and stories. In the first section below, a prophecy is made about Jack and Anna before they are born. As the two grow up the prophecy about them breeds a mutual distain for each other, but eventually as they become isolated from their peers, their friendship takes on a romantic nature. When they come of age, they decide to run away, leaving Elliot's pages blank and devoid of characters. The second section below describes their place of refuge. Eventually Jack and Anna are called into the real world, finding themselves on Isle Moria.]*

To write a book, you need to find the hours, collect the minutes, and harvest the seconds, and know how to fill them with words. But to make a story you also need something else. You need a city without a name.

You need no other city but that one, so why give it a name?

To write a story, you need bodies to fill it. You need their marrow, the sinews of the spirits to sew their lives into words, and their body's breath to fill the spaces between. But stories can reach back. The right kind of story always fights back against anyone who touches it.

The right story doesn't begin in the city without a name, but it starts there. The right story starts in the dark, after rain. It doesn't start on the grid of lit roads, but between them, in a stone-paved alley. A pub's back door slams open and two figures crash out, one falling to the ground and the other standing over him. The story starts with two names.

"These are the names of the chosen," Stanley gasps as he stumbles, getting up. His stomach kicks and pitches. Jenna, standing over him with her hands on her hips, doesn't help.

"These are the names," Stanley chokes. The contents of his stomach drip onto wet night street.

"What, Stanley? What?" Jenna covers her nose with her hand.

“These are the names,” he spits louder, looking up at Jenna from his sweat-heavy hair. “These are the names of the chosen: Jack and Anna. These are the names.”

“Fool,” Jenna calls him. But if she didn’t care, she could be gone by now, back in to the hurried kitchen, back to the smell of metal and starch. Instead, she calls Stanley’s bent body *fool* again, digging her hands deeper into her hips, not minding how the cold makes her breath fog and her armpits shrink into her body. She kicks him, but not hard.

“What, Stan? Say it again.”

“Jack and Anna,” he whispers. His body goes limp with a thud and a splash.

Jenna looks back at the kitchen door. She can feel the bodies hurrying on the other side. She won’t be missed. She hooks her arms under Stanley’s and begins to pull him up the long flight of stairs to her third-floor room. As Stanley’s feet thud against each step Jenna repeats to herself, *Jack and Anna*.

This is how the right story begins.

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The wind spreads the dust wide and thin over the plains. The hills arch black and still. The small house’s dust-covered and sun-washed walls creak. No roads lead to or leave from the house’s door. A horse’s tail flicks flies from its back. The other drinks from a tin trough.

Jack has been on edge for the past three weeks. He can’t figure out why. Nothing has changed—just as it’s supposed to. At night, with Anna breathing quietly beside him or in his arms, he becomes aware of his heart, how it beats harder and faster the more he thinks about it. What if it continued to increase in speed and sound, thudding until it burst? His mind feels white and no way he turns brings sleep. He doesn’t know if he came here to die, to make extra time, or if the cold plains and the dusty house are part of a plan he can’t escape.

Anna reads by the window even though Jack doesn't like it. *Like talking to the dead*, he calls it. Jack brings out a long silver knife and begins cutting whey from curds that will become cheese in a few months time. When Jack and Anna escaped, they had remembered to bring a small culture so they could still have cheese.

The knife runs smoothly through the soft masses of white. A black streak moves out of the corner of Jack's eyes—a thud. Anna jumps and before he thinks, Jack is pointing the knife at the window. After a frozen second, Anna arches over the sill.

“That's the fifth I've heard in three weeks,” she slides the window up and dips her hand in a pitcher of water, coating it lightly with cold liquid. She bends her torso low over the sill and flicks the water down on to the still body of a bird, wings splayed out in the dirt.

“Wake up,” the small droplets land on the feathers making them glint against the sun, “Wake up. Come back now.” The water and dust make a muddy shadow around the feathered figure.

The thudding still sounds in Jack's heart. A rattling comes from his hand, still holding the knife, shaking against the table. He moves to Anna.

She pulls him close to her. He runs his hands through her sand-colored hair and says, “Something is changing.”