

House of Hollow Bones: A Novella

by

Natalie LoVetri

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

Table of Contents

List of Figures ii

Abstract iii

Acknowledgments iv

Dedication v

House of Hollow Bones 1

Afterword: *House of Hollow Bones* 121

Works Cited and Consulted 141

List of Figures

Figure 1: Natalie LoVetri, *Making Peace*. Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 2021. 128

Figure 2: Natalie LoVetri. *Edna P*. Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 2021. 129

Figure 3: Natalie LoVetri. *Resolve*- incomplete. Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 2022. 130

Abstract

House of Hollow Bones is a psychologically driven novella that explores the psychological impacts of mental illness and traumatic loss within familial relationships. The story follows the lives of two sisters, Edith and Angela, and their father, Frank. It is composed in three sections, each one written from a different character's perspective. The plot begins when Frank and Angela get into a fight at a family dinner at Edith's house. Edith must leave the room with her son, Jacob, who has autism, because the noise and arguing will upset him. She spends the moments in her bedroom recalling memories from her past. Edith harbours a secret that only her sister is aware of. Jacob is not biologically Adrien's child. After a string of failed attempts at pregnancy and miscarriages Edith goes to spend the weekend with Angela. They go to a party and Edith cheats on Adrien and becomes pregnant. Angela swears to keep Edith's secret, but after Edith moves back from Toronto, Edith is not sure if Angela is still trustworthy. Edith becomes anxious about her sister's mental state. Angela's substance abuse has escalated, and she has become obsessed with finding their mother, Tommy, who abandoned their family when the girls were young. Angela blames Frank for Tommy's leaving and accuses him of hiding information about Tommy's whereabouts. Before Angela can confront her father again, Frank commits suicide. While Edith and Angela sort through his belongings, Edith finds a stack of letters from Tommy but hides them from Angela. After finding nothing that helps her with her search for Tommy at Frank's apartment, Angela turns to alcohol. Later that night, she ends up falling in her shower and becoming concussed. Edith comes to watch over her during her recovery and decides to share Tommy's letters with Angela. Although Tommy is now given a voice through these letters, Angela and Edith cannot agree on a narrative. Although this is the case, they find a way to re-discover and recover their relationship.

Acknowledgments

I would like to offer a heartfelt thank you to my thesis advisor, Dr. Alison Calder, for her honest and generous guidance and support throughout the course of writing my thesis. Thank you, also, to my committee members, Dr. Lindsay Diehl and Dr. Jocelyn Thorpe, for taking the time to read my thesis and offering insightful comments and suggestions. Thank you to Dr. Lucas Tromly, Graduate Chair, for his ongoing support. My sincerest thanks to the Department of English graduate program assistant, Anita King, who has been invaluable in helping me navigate through MA requirements. I am much indebted to Dr. Vanessa Warne, whose passion for learning and teaching first inspired me to pursue my undergraduate degree in English. Her mentorship continues to inspire me in all my writing and research. I am also very grateful to Dr. Dana Medoro, who has always offered encouragement and support in pursuing my ideas and writing.

I had the honour of being the recipient of the C.D. Howe Memorial Fellowship in Creative Writing and Oral Culture in 2021 and again in 2022. I would like to gratefully acknowledge Dr. Alway and the C.D. Howe Memorial Foundation as well as the Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture for making this possible. Thank you to my fellow colleagues who have shared their ideas and perspectives with me during this long journey, especially Jessie Krahn. Jessie, our coffee meet-ups inspired me and kept me sane during the pandemic.

Finally, thank you to my parents for their enduring love and support. I am deeply grateful to my husband, Paul, and our children, Rylan, Jethro, and Boston. Thank you for your patience, your understanding, your love and your support. I know I made it difficult at times. Most of all, thank you Paul, for your unwavering belief in me, especially through those darker days when I was unable to believe in myself.

For Paul

House of Hollow Bones: A Novella

by

Natalie LoVetri

*Fear
of drowning,
fear of being that alone,
kept me busy making a deal
as if I could buy my way out of it
and it worked for two years
and all of July*

- Anne Sexton

“Imitations of Drowning”
The Complete Poems (107)

House of Hollow Bones

PART ONE: EDITH

Edie sat on the edge of the bed and stared through blurry eyes at the pillow she held in her lap. It lay there begging her to bury her face and scream into it as loud as she could. The urge was almost overwhelming. She played it out in her mind. She wondered how much sound a pillow would really stifle, could it contain a sob, a cry, a howl, a scream? If someone were sitting beside her, would they hear it? What if they were down the hall or on the other side of the house? She wondered how tight to her face she'd have to hold it, whether she could stop the sound at her lips or, by shoving the pillow into her mouth, stop it at her throat. She lifted the pillow to her face and closed her eyes, the soft cotton only just touching her lips. It smelled of honeysuckle and musk. It reminded her of someone she used to be.

When the smell of an orange was only an orange and not a pinch at the bottom of her stomach. No boundaries. No arbitrary lines to compartmentalize her life or to rein in her passion or mortify her longing. She remembered believing once that there was so much more. When she was ten, she remembered her wrists would get tired of holding up the book before her eyes got tired of reading it. But Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, with its gold gilded pages, was too regal looking not to read. It was actually the way that her dad had raised his eyebrows when he saw the book she was holding that really motivated her to continue, though. Truthfully, she didn't fully grasp the context and she didn't know what some of the words meant, but she remembered understanding the feeling. A tone that permeated the pages and resonated deep within her bones. It was a mixture of homesickness, yearning, romance, and promise. Feelings she wanted to feel, and she began to feel them. An anticipation for something she couldn't quite

define. The idea seeded. The belief that life would energize and propel her to some beautiful end. The expectation of an exceptional destiny. The notion that life would inevitably reveal a quintessential meaning or purpose to her. It was only a matter of her recognizing the signs.

Edie kept her eyes closed and the pillow close and inhaled again deeply. She searched her memory for certain moments, trying to find the signs.

1996. The year Edie graduated high school. Reckless, a recluse, she spent half her senior year drowning pills in vodka and by February things had spiraled out so bad she spent ten days in the psych ward for assessment. Somehow, she still graduated on time. She walked into the grad reception with a micky taped to her thigh, hidden under the skirt of her dress. Halfway through dinner the bottle was empty. She could feel the liquor churn in her stomach, warm and heavy, pulsing like something alive, fueling something malicious.

She turned from her table and the date that her best friend Charlotte had set her up with to survey the sea of tables. She saw Joel Redkee sitting at a table across the room. Joel was an oaf, a jock she'd let copy off her in bio class, but he was tall. When they would talk before or after class, he'd stand close and lean over her. She liked how it made her feel small. Edie left her table and made her way across the room towards him. Joel had loosened his tie and it hung dangerously, like a noose at his neck. The top buttons of his dress shirt were undone. He had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his arm was stretched across the back of the chair next to him. She remembered the veins that bulged under his skin. As she walked past, she let her finger drag from his fingertips to his elbow.

Joel was lifting her onto the back of the toilet with his hands up her skirt when Edie heard banging on the bathroom door and Charlotte yelling for her. Joel probably would have hit a home run that night if it wasn't for Charlotte. Edie replayed that moment on the back of the toilet

with Joel over again. She could almost feel the cold porcelain against her thigh. She could almost remember the taste of his mouth. She could almost taste the freedom of it all.

The summer after high school, Edie got a job at a hotel restaurant and she and Charlotte moved in together. There was always a case of beer in the fridge and a bong on the coffee table.

By mid August the novelty had worn off. Charlotte had a new, uppity, downtown job licking envelopes and she only had time to party on the weekend. Edie resented the new Charlotte, with her fancy office clothes and her new sophisticated friends. Her resentment eroded the crack in their friendship until it became a canyon. Edie started writing her name on her bananas and cans of tomato soup. She got sick of doing all the dishes and let them overflow in the sink. When she found out Charlotte was trying to quit smoking, Edie made sure to light up each time they were in the same room. She brought random people home from the bar during the week when she knew Charlotte had to work in the morning. By the end of October, Edie had drank herself an ulcer and Charlotte had had enough. Charlotte told everyone they knew that Edie had gone off the rails and told Edie she was moving out.

Early that December, Charlotte was killed in a car accident. Edie found out Charlotte had been drunk and swerved into oncoming traffic. The man in the pickup truck survived but Charlotte, in her mom's tiny Fiesta, didn't. Edie stopped drinking and started looking for a smaller apartment. She packed her bong and her ashtray, her photo albums and her old SLR Minolta. She packed her cigarettes and a framed picture of an angel watching over two children crossing a bridge. The same one that used to hang above her bed at home. When she moved into the small studio apartment, she didn't unpack any of it. She wrapped herself with a blanket and

sat on the futon couch. The view from her window was the light grey stone wall of the building beside hers. She didn't have a TV or a phone, just a clock radio. After four days she pulled the blanket off, took a shower and went and enrolled in an administrative assistant course.

A year and a half later, Edie had her certificate. She decided on the skirt. She was interviewing at a mechanic shop. Maybe a little leg would distract them from her lack of experience. It always helped her get bigger tips serving at the hotel bar.

She stood in front of the bathroom sink. She did up a button on her blouse, undid it, bent over and jiggled her bright red bra, looked in the mirror, and then did it up again. *You went to school for this Edie, she told herself, you don't need to look like a slut.*

She put her hair into a bun at the top of her head. *Too pretentious.* She took it down and instead gathered her hair into a loose knot at the nape of her neck. *Better. It says organized but not inflexible.*

Edie put on heels, then switched to flats. She stared at herself in the full-length mirror that the previous renter had left. She felt her eyes water, so she bit the inside of her cheek. She thought about ripping off the blouse and the stupid skirt and returning to the blanket on the futon. She looked at the clock radio. There was still time to stop and pick up a pack of cigarettes. She closed her eyes. *I'm going to get the job, she told herself. I'm going to work normal hours and wear professional clothes and be a normal person.*

Edie got the job. She remembered how good normal had felt, before the novelty of it all had worn off. The smell of the honeysuckle on her pillow took her away from normal. She breathed in, longing for the pinch at the bottom of her stomach that she knew it would bring. It

was the same burning butterflies branding her insides that she had felt when she touched Joel's arm at grad. But this burn was still raw. When Jacob was a baby, she would pack up the stroller and slip from the oppressive loneliness of afternoons alone in the country. The air seemed lighter in the anonymity of the farmers' market. In aisles devoted to artisan soaps and eco-friendly cleaners, ensconced in the heaviness of orange oil and patchouli, she would eye each maker in their stand, becoming inebriated on a toxic conflation of envy and the memory of a desire she had forgotten. That's where she met the soap maker.

"Why, you look like lavender and bergamot," he called to her, as she meandered down the market aisle. Today she didn't just smile and continue walking past. Today she welcomed—no—she needed the distraction like a lost Bedouin who spots an oasis through the mirage. She broke free of the shifting dunes of shoppers and pushed the stroller towards the soap stall. The man on the other side watched her. He had a thick dark beard and was wearing a slouchy beanie the colour of autumn leaves in candlelight.

"I hate lavender and I don't know what that other thing you said is." Her tone was curt, but her eyes gave away what she hid with a measured smile.

"Hate...lavender," the man groaned as he drove an invisible knife through his heart. "But how?"

"Don't tell me you only make lavender soap?" She asked, feigning disbelief. "What's this one here?" She picked up a bar labeled Dead Sea Me.

"That's a scrub, great for exfoliation." He leaned forward, so his head was level with hers. "But are you sure you don't like lavender? I'm rarely wrong about these things." He tilted his head, watching her face closely. She put Dead Sea Me back on the table and, glancing up,

caught him studying her. The intensity caught her off guard and a laugh slipped out before she could catch it back. She put her head back down and read each of the names labeling the colourful row of bar soap. There was Livin' the Lemon Life, and Orange you Clean, It's Eucalyptus, Man and Don't forget your Sandalwood. At the end of the table was Just like Mom's Honey Oatmeal.

“Did you name all these yourself?” She asked without looking up.

“Sure did.” He smiled. “Made them all myself, too.”

“Well, I'll have to try one then.” She looked up and met his eyes. “Surprise me, I'll take anything—except lavender.” His eyes were fiercely blue, not the clear bluey white of snow but rather the deep midnight of a stormy sea. A shudder of violence flickered in them. She remembered a dream where she was drowning. There were creases beneath his eyes when he smiled, but he didn't look as old as she first thought.

“I'm going to say orange and clove.” He handed her a dark cream opaque block with thick transparent swirls of orange running through it. “It's fairly full-bodied, but the citrus keeps it fresh.” It was labeled Not Your Daddy's Old Spice. She held it to her nose. Autumn leaves before the dampness and rot settles in.

“It's lovely,” she said softly. She paid him and walked away from the soap stall, the butterflies burning in her stomach.

As Edie sat on the edge of her bed replaying the memory, she felt the pinch in her stomach grow until her entire abdomen seemed to contort. The feeling of something impending, some darkness inside awakening. Like the tiny seed of being left withering deep inside had finally found water. That feeling was once such a furtive asylum.

Eddie kept her eyes closed in her pillow so she could stay a while, wading farther into the depths of memory. Like water, they wash over her, pull her under to a place where guilt doesn't float, like cheerios, and mottle the refractions from above. A place dark and free, no mirrors, no reflections, no breath. Her eyes flash open beneath the dark waters. She resurfaces to find her pockets heavy with slivers of silver.

Eddie became fixated on the soap man, one self-harming reverie at a time.

Eddie remembered when she told her sister about the man who made soap at the market. She told Angela he was tall and friendly, but not how he would lean his broad shoulders forward when he spoke to make sure he could see her eyes. She told Ange he was soft-spoken and kind, and how he always seemed cheerful, but she didn't note that when he spoke it was like a wave that slowly rumbled in from the deep, only to roll gently up the shore. Eddie told her about how he would wrap the soap. How he would take the small rectangle of brown paper in his giant hands and with thick fingers, carefully fold it around the bar of soap, tucking in the end somehow without ever needing tape or string. Like an origami wrapped present. He always labeled the paper package by hand on the bottom with black marker: Logan's Fine Soaps. Eddie told her he had a nickname for all his customers but didn't mention that he called her Orange Spice. She told her about Pete, Logan's beagle that never left his side, who would snore all afternoon, sleeping loyally at Logan's feet. Eddie had even told her about the deep blue of Logan's eyes but left out how, if they hadn't always seemed to be smiling, she would be terrified of them.

She couldn't rely on Angela to keep a secret. Not another one. Besides, Eddie would never betray Adrien. Not again. Not ever for the thrill of a novel touch. But daydreams don't count, and they were enough to pull her from her ennui. With Logan, imagination was close enough.

Was it? Wasn't it? She remembered waking one morning and still being able to feel the weight of his hand after he had brushed the hair from her face in a dream. But it was beyond touch, this desire she cultured. This idea of him disentangled her from the quotidian of her days. She would stare out the window and envision soft, gentle lips, so vivid she could almost feel the weight of his mouth. Each day, standing at the window, closing her eyes, envisioning that touch again. Trying to feel those lips again. Envisioning something to make her feel alive. Edie opened her eyes and the memory melted away like morning frost.

Angela managed to wreck that too. Edie should have known it wasn't the soap Angela was interested in when she asked to tag along with her and Jacob to the market. It was Angela after all. At least with Logan, Angela was happy. When Angela was miserable the whole world deserved to be miserable along with her. If Angela was happy, it was less likely she would be inclined to rip Edie's whole world apart.

Angry voices pierced the room. The honeysuckle had begun to smell bitter anyway, and she pulled the pillow from her face. Edie looked over at Jacob with apprehension. He was facing away from her, his shoulders hunched over a small table. He didn't notice the voices or her struggle. Something to be grateful for. She wiped the bitterness from her cheeks and walked over to him. He was colouring a picture of a small sailboat. It was rocking gently on an open sea. In it sat a little boy in a straw hat with a fishing rod. Edie crouched down so she could see his face. He was using a dark green crayon and was intensely focused on the side of the little wooden boat. He didn't seem to notice she was there. For a moment, she felt a sense of relief. Relief that Jacob didn't question being whisked off into another room in the middle of dinner, that he didn't

question her tears, that he could exist outside all the tension and all the anger that festered outside the bedroom door at this moment. But the relief quickly turned to guilt. Some things shouldn't have silver linings. The autism was her burden to bear. She walked over to the door and pressed her ear against it. Angela's voice was the loudest.

“You didn't think that maybe this might have been important to tell me? I told you I was trying to find her—do you ever listen? —do you even care about me at all?”

Eddie couldn't make out what Frank was trying to say.

“SHUT UP! You are NOT listening—you never listen,” Angela screamed.

...

“Why are you trying so hard to stop me? Because you know—you KNOW it was your fault she left. I'm done with this shit—do you know it takes me a whole week to mentally recover...”

Eddie sighed and moved away from the door. She picked up the hamper from beside the dresser and moved it to the bed. She managed to fold two t-shirts and a pair of pants before giving up. She looked over at Jacob. He was still sailing on the little wooden boat.

She crawled across to Adrien's side of the bed and lay down. She could see the top of the telephone posts and the wires that connected them out the window. She felt heavy, weighed down. It felt so much heavier lately. It wasn't only on top of her, but everywhere, it completely surrounded her. The heaviness infused her skin and in return her skin rebelled, pulled back against her bones, it sagged and hung, drawing her always down. She felt the tops of her shoulders to make sure the skin hadn't split. The tingling began in her stomach, she could feel it spread, prickling up into her chest and clawing at the back of her eyes. Could she manage to drag this around? Wouldn't her skin just finally split and fall in a heap at her feet and what would be

left underneath? She tried to swallow the stinging doubt, envision the stained-glass wings of a monarch after splitting its chrysalis. The only image that came was Jeff Goldblum's face splitting open in *The Fly*. She heard a bang and knew it was the front door slamming. She let out her breath and wondered which one of them left. She walked to the window and saw the blue Mustang peel onto the gravel road. She didn't hear Adrien open the door as she stood watching the dust settle back down.

"Angie left, but I guess you knew that."

"Yeah, I saw." She turned to look at him. "Is my dad still here?"

"Yeah, but I think he wants to go. Are you coming out? I'll stay with Jacob if you want to go talk to him." Adrien walked over to the little desk and squatted low. "Hey buddy, whatcha doing?"

"I don't want to talk but I suppose that's best." Edie paused at the door. "I wish she didn't move back. It was easier when she was gone."

"I know, love, but she's your sister." Adrien turned to look at her, but she had already left.

As Edie walked down the hall to the kitchen, she remembered a dream, or maybe it was only a feeling. *Face down on thin ice. Fingers of sunlight twinkle through the mist. She looks first at his reaching hand and then at his mouth speaking words without sound. Without fear, she hears only the bite of ice cracking. The warning doesn't make her take her eyes off his face. Soft eyes hold the universe out of reach. The world goes dark in the midnight of under-water. Her tipsy warmth turns cold. Below, light cuts the water in silent sharp blues. She feels its grip.*

She lets it come.

“I just don’t think I can do this. We haven’t talked in three years and this is how it starts? I hoped the distance would put things in perspective but she’s just the same. Everything I do, everything I’ve done has never been right to her. I am always the villain, I can’t say two words without her jumping on me, twisting what I say, making up a past that didn’t exist, I know I made mistakes raising you girls but she’s making me out as the devil.” Frank paced the room as Edie started stacking dirty plates at the table. “I can’t do it again.”

“Yeah, but what are you gonna do.” Edie sighed. “Someone has to give.”

“She has an answer for everything and screams at me if I try to get one thing in edgewise.”

“I was hoping she’d be different too. I don’t know how to fix it. She blames you for what mom did. She blames you for everything.”

“Don’t you think I know what happened? I was there for Christ’s sake—she left me too.” A plate slipped from his hand and broke on the floor. “Damn it, Edith, I’m sorry. Where’s your broom.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll grab it, just sit down for a minute so you don’t cut yourself.” She left the kitchen, glad for the distraction. She opened the hall closet and stared into the darkness, breathing in the silence. A tea towel fell from the shelf. Edie saw the music box. She twisted the small gold key in the back and opened the lid. The soft tinny music brought memories that hung thick in the shadows of the closet.

“Isn’t she beautiful, Mum?” Edie stared at the music box her mother kept on her dresser. Edie watched the tiny ballerina spin pirouettes in front of the mirrored lid. “Look how her little skirt moves as she spins and the pretty little ribbons holding her slippers on. I wish I could be a ballerina.” Edie felt her mom come up behind her. She looked up and saw her mom in the dresser mirror staring at the music box. Edie didn’t recognize the expression on her mom’s face. It was a look somewhere between horror and panic.

“Oh Edie, what about her poor little ankles bound to that pedestal, or the track she can’t break free from. Imagine only being able to listen to one tune for your entire life.”

“I meant a real ballerina, silly.”

Her mother’s expression changed. “That was silly of me. Here, you take it.” Edie’s mom shut the lid gently and handed it to her. “Go on now, go play in your bedroom.”

The music slowed and finally stopped. Edie stared at the box in the palm of her hand. The little mirror on the lid didn’t reveal the pedestal that bound the ballerina’s ankles, or the track that determined her dance. Her reflection didn’t reveal the fixity of her smile, or the privation whittled into her stiff wooden figure. Edie shut the music box. Quickly, she shoved it back behind the towels on the top shelf and the memory back down into her pocket. Edie grabbed the broom and walked back into the kitchen. Frank was flipping through a parts catalogue Adrien had left on the kitchen table.

“Do *you* think I’m the reason your mom left?”

“People are responsible for their own actions. Mom could have come back. She could have tried to see us.” Edie dumped the broken pieces of the plate into the garbage and carried on with clearing the dining room table. “She could have at least told us why she left.” Edie stood at

the sink and stared at the water pouring from the tap, waiting for it to get hot. “I don’t think Angela wants to think of it like that, but I don’t really know why. I think she’s been struggling. She seemed so happy with Logan.”

“I remember liking him, when she’d bring him around. What happened with that?”

“I don’t know. I tried talking to her, but she would just shut down the conversation and then, out of nowhere, she just packed up and left town. I only found out that she was moving when she called me two days before her flight asking if Adrien had room in his shop to keep her car. I didn’t know she was coming back either. You didn’t talk to her at all when she was gone?”

“No.”

“Hmmm.” Edie turned the tap off and stared out the window.

“I thought the distance would help. Make her forget about finding her mother. I’ll tell you what I told Angela—Tommy left of her own accord. She didn’t want nothing to do with us then and she doesn’t want anything to do with us now, God damn it. You know I tried, Edie. Damn it, I tried.”

“Dad, it’s okay.” Edie poured brandy into a glass and set it down on the table in front of him. “I’m not sure what made her move back, but she seems more focused than ever on finding mom. Before she left for Toronto, she let something slip about trying to find the right combination of meds. She’s looking for a magic cocktail that will fix everything. I think she’s thinking herself crazy. All she focuses on is herself, and I think it just ends up magnifying every little issue. It consumes her, but you can’t tell her that. She takes everything you say as an attack.”

“Will she talk to you about it?” Frank came and stood beside Edie, watching the crows through the window above the sink.

“She used to.” Edie handed him a plate to dry. “After she moved, she’d send me a text on Mother’s Day and Jake’s Birthday, but that’s it. Honestly, I’m tired of it. I don’t want to get sucked back into her drama, and I’m mad. She comes into my house, hasn’t seen anyone in years, hasn’t seen Jacob in years, has a meltdown, yells at everyone, and then just leaves. She doesn’t care how it affects anyone cause all she can see is herself. She screams her face off when she knows that Jacob can’t handle that—for Christ’s sake, if someone sneezes too loudly it’ll send him into sensory overload. She should know that more than anyone. She doesn’t get the right to treat everyone like shit. She doesn’t get to lose control and then not have to answer for any of it. She doesn’t get to do that. That’s not how it works.” Frank didn’t say anything, leaving her words to hang there, suspended with the sound of running water and clanging dishes.

The thought of Angela losing control made Edie’s throat tighten. Angela knew what Edie had done. She was the only person who knew Jacob was not Adrien’s son and that made her dangerous. Angela had the power to shatter Edie’s life on a whim. Edie felt the paranoia crawl up from the pool of fear she kept deep in her stomach. It scaled her chest and settled at the back of her neck to gnaw her skin, like gnats dissecting carrion. It pricked the sides of her face, taunting her, berating her. *You should have swallowed your secret. The secrets you swallow die in you. Left on a tongue they slip. “I’m not going to tell anyone. You don’t have to worry.” Angela had told her. But things change. People change.*

Edie recalled the cloud of dust that hung in the air after the Mustang skidded across the gravel driveway. Angela couldn’t be trusted and now she was back. Edie broke free from the sink and tried rolling the tension from her head and neck.

“Geeze, there’s a lot of birds out there.” Frank leaned over the sink, toward the window to get a better look and bumped his head against the glass. Edie stopped wiping the table to look at him. He was rubbing a spot on his forehead.

“Did you schedule your eye surgery?”

“Are they all crows? Do crows get that big?”

“Yeah, they chased away our owl.” Edie hung the cloth on the edge of the sink and dried her hands. “When do you go for surgery?”

“I don’t need to go in. It’s not getting worse.”

“That’s what they told you?”

“Nothing a new prescription couldn’t fix. You didn’t even notice, by the way.” He turned his head from side to side showing off the frames.

“They look exactly like the old ones.”

“I should get going.” Frank left the window and grabbed his phone off the kitchen table. Edie watched as he put on his jacket.

“Adrien can drive you home. He can put your bike in the back of the truck. The sun will be down by the time you get into the city.”

“I know you’re busy with Jacob and the library,” Frank said, ignoring her, “but maybe you could reach out to her.” Edie felt herself stiffen. There was a vulnerability in his voice that struck her. She felt it as though it had physically pierced her skin. She didn’t want to hear it. She didn’t want to feel it. She folded the moment and tucked it away. She turned away from him and looked out the window. There were a lot of crows. She counted five on the lawn and three others in the maple tree. One of the ones on the ground had something pinned under its claw. It was picking and pulling at it with its beak. The other seven were staring at it, cawing, wanting what it

had. Finally, they lost their patience and they started swooping, flapping, and hopping closer, trying to steal whatever it had. Edie leaned closer to the glass. It was another bird that was pinned under his claw. She could make out the tiny claws on the end of a twig-like leg that was sticking up from the grass.

“Sure, I’ll try talking to her,” she said softly. “I’ll go get Adrien.”

“No, no, I want to ride. I’ll be fine.” She knew it was useless to argue.

“Jake’s asleep,” Adrien said as he let himself fall onto the couch beside her. “You let your dad ride home? Aren’t you worried he’ll crash his bike again?”

“What can I do?” Edie shrugged. “The man’s an ox. Thanks for putting Jake to bed.”

“You don’t have to thank me.” He moved a strand of her hair behind her ear. “He’s my son too.” Edie turned away so he wouldn’t see her eyes. She rested her head on her arm and stared out the front window over the back of the couch. “Are you okay?” Adrien added softly.

“I don’t know. I’m mad, and I don’t like being mad but what’s worse is that I don’t even care to make it right. If that’s even possible. I don’t understand this whole obsession, and I don’t want to. She is hurting everyone around her, but she manages to twist it all around. I think she wants dad to admit to something, to take the blame for how life turned out, take the blame for mom leaving, and being a shitty dad, to take the blame for her mental state and all the emotional baggage she has to carry around, but at this point, what would that prove—what would that do? At some point she’s going to cut in too deep, and I won’t be able to stitch it back together. She’s

built a wall around herself, and I don't think she'll let me through. Worse is, I don't think I even care anymore. I wish she didn't move back."

"I don't think you mean that. It was just a stressful night. Your dad and her won't talk for a bit and then they'll just pretend it didn't happen, like all the times before."

"I don't know. I just don't get it. Why would you want to look for someone who obviously cares nothing about you, and then hurt all the people who actually care about you? Why dig up the past just to open all those wounds? Mom left us. It wasn't the other way around."

"Maybe she's looking for answers. Try to be sympathetic, she doesn't have anyone. She's been all alone since her and what's his name broke up. That would be tough."

"Logan—yeah, he was so good for her, but of course she screwed that up somehow."

"Edie," Adrien softly reproached.

"I don't want to be sympathetic," she pouted, aware of how childish she sounded. "I don't care. I can't stand this dissecting the past—whatever, I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"It's okay love." He put his hand gently on her thigh. "I have to go lock up the back, then maybe I can help take your mind off things," he said meaningfully, inching his hand up her thigh. She managed half a smile in reply. Adrien squeezed her hip before he got up.

Edie stayed staring out the window after he left.

She closes her eyes and tries in vain to construct some illusion to lose herself in.

Everyone's alone, even my desire has left me.

From the nebulous collection of emotion and memory converging in Edie's mind, images of her life emerge.

He walks, no “rushing beast,” into the night. The stars distract from the mildew-covered caulked corners of the window, ever good at collecting secrets. *Lucky, I do the details*, she thought to herself. *This house is full of pockets you say you’ll empty later. I watch the spots grow wider, in fractal patterns the edges crawl out. It doesn’t bother me anymore—I trip over your boots at the back door and stifle a scream that I repeat over and over in my mind, and the harder I push, the quicker they come and force me on my back—quick—don’t linger softly—please.*

Her thoughts make her cringe. Disgust and irritation seed quick and dank roots crawl out stirring up the musk, reaching into every pocket. She unfurls her brow when she feels Adrien take her by the wrist, but she can’t get rid of the weight on her chest.

She lets him take her to bed, but his fingertips only reinforce her guilt, as they dance across her skin, flaunting every fault. She can’t quiet the voices in her head.

Don’t think, she closes her eyes tight and pleads silently with herself. *Don’t think through all the dirty details that dull emotion and take touch away and make my skin crawl instead of yield—just breathe, breathe the thoughts out that keep swirling and twisting and taking touch away, just succumb, succumb. Damn it—hurry—Jesus Christ! Enough baiting. Just get inside and obliterate thinking—erase reflection, memory, and being. There are no bricks to salvage. Tear down this house, not brick by brick but all at once—obliterate it into dust and throw it into the wind so nothing of me remains. I don’t want a shrine, a monument, or epitaph—just dissolution—annihilate all these poisonous reflections.*

Eddie kept her eyes closed as the weight of Adrien's body rolled off her hips and on to his side of the bed. It took a minute for his breathing to slow. When it did, he reached over and squeezed her hand. "Goodnight, love," he whispered, before rolling over.

"Goodnight." Eddie opened her eyes and carefully walked over to the bathroom. She sat on the toilet and stared at the crumbling grout between the floor tiles, waiting for the residue of their intimacy to exit her body. *I forgot to set the coffee.*

She stared at the water flowing down into the drain as she rolled the bar of soap between her hands. It was out of love that she had done it, right? It was for them both, to have a family. Eddie stood in the doorway and watched Adrien's shoulders slowly rise and fall. *It wasn't infidelity, it wasn't for pleasure, it was... it was a sort of duty, a sacrifice.* No—no. She couldn't go that far. She erased the thought from her mind and tried to swallow the shame that word instilled. Adrien was good to her. Too good. She thought back to when they were first dating, when they'd found themselves at that country bar. They stood across from each other, two beers on the tall table between them.

Adrien stared at her in disbelief. "You're kidding? Not even in school? In gym class?"

"Nope. Never."

He finished off his beer and set the bottle on the table. "Well, come on then. I'll show you how." He held out his hand. Eddie laughed and put her hand in his.

"I have to warn you, I have two left feet and I can't dance without a line, never mind in one." Adrien just laughed and shook his head. He pulled her over to the edge of the dance floor.

"Ok, now just watch my feet for a minute." Eddie couldn't help laughing as she watched him step around in kind of a box type shape, crossing his feet one way and then another, then turning directions with a little kick, the whole time his hands on his hips. He motioned for her to

come beside him, and she did. She tried to keep up, but she kept mis-stepping. She moved left when she was supposed to move right, and they crashed into each other. Adrien caught her arm before she lost her balance and fell. They were laughing so hard they had to get off the dance floor.

It was August and the night was warm. He held her hand as they walked. There was a little park beside her apartment. He spread out his jacket on the grass so they could lie down and stare at the stars. There was no moon that night, so the stars were bright. She remembered leaning her cheek against his shoulder. She remembered the feeling of his shirt on her cheek and how fresh it smelled, like clean laundry. She remembered the electricity when the edge of their hands touched and how long it took for her hand to eventually end up inside his. She remembered feeling so free.

Adrien stirred and rolled over in their bed. His hand went to find her and when it didn't, he opened one eye and saw her leaning against the bathroom doorway. "Why are you up?"

"I forgot to set the coffee. I'll be right there."

"I did it already, come to bed."

Eddie slid under the sheets beside him. He was too good for her. He could never find out what she did. Never. She closed her eyes. She didn't want to think about the bad anymore. She didn't want to think about Angela anymore. She just wanted it to be how it was before, when Angela was gone, and her ghosts were buried deep under ground. Sleep came unbeknownst and memories turned into dreams.

All Edie could see were wildflowers. They lined the path, some as tall as her waist, with yellow and purple and white flowers. They stood silent and still. Stoic in the thick air that made it so hard to move. The path widened before her.

Something lay on the ground ahead. A burial mound. No—a wreath. Dandelion stems, woven together, the bright yellow heads faced the sky, like a crown.

She watched the gold begin to drain as though the earth took a deep breath from beneath. Each tiny petal collapsed from within. Another breath and the stems begin to deflate, surrendering their milky blood to their kin.

The ground seemed to swell to purge its theft, the inevitable exhale but when she leaned closer, she realized it wasn't the earth or the decaying wreath that was moving but the white squirming maggots that covered them.

She stepped back and looked for the trees, but she couldn't see beyond the molding bower. Then the ground came up and swallowed the light. Blind, she only heard the screech, or maybe a scream that stole her from the dream.

Edie opened her eyes and listened. Jacob would make noises in his sleep. Another minute passed and she let out her breath and lay back down. The clock glowed 3:38. Edie stared at the ceiling and listened to Adrien's breathing. The stubborn sound pierced the deafening silence of the room. In and out, in and out. Over and over the melodic repetition droned into the darkness,

slow and steady. Raspy on the exhale, a fitting soundtrack to the stagnant pattern of the stippled ceiling that she was allowing to burn into her retinas. The past crept in with the distortion.

Edie remembered the ceiling at Angela's was smooth. She didn't know about in her bedroom, but she remembered, years ago, when she was lying on the couch, the ceiling in the living room was smooth. Smooth with a slight ridge down the middle, where the two sheets of drywall had been taped and plastered together. It was a subtle defect, but if you stare at something long enough, you notice those things. Nothing manmade was ever perfect. Nothing manmade told the truth. That was one of the reasons why Edie had agreed to move out to the country, the hinterlands—that's what Adrien had called it when he took her to see the property. Adrien saw it only for its utilitarian potential. *Emotions don't belong in financial decisions*, he would say, and *you should never mix family with business*. The outbuildings could easily be converted to a shop, a way to take back control, to stop working the way others wanted him to and start working for himself. When Edie saw the forty acres of untouched grassland and forest that stretched beyond the house, she was sold. She was sick of the suburbs, sick of the pristine lawns and the pristine people. Nature doesn't lie, only people do. The wild would let her breathe or make her choke on her guilt; either was better than the city.

The white noise of the bedroom was becoming too close. She checked the clock. 3:52. Still too early. At four she would get up. She closed her eyes. When she opened them, it was five. She listened for a minute to make sure Adrien was still asleep and then she quietly got up and slipped on her housecoat. She looked for her book, but it wasn't on the dresser. She must

have left it in the living room. She slipped her phone into her pocket and left, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Tiptoeing down the hall always reminded her of when she was thirteen and would sneak out of her bedroom window. She would turn off her lights at eight and wait until ten o'clock. Then she would meet up with a friend that lived down the street and they would wander around the neighbourhood and end up in the tube slide at the park. It was there, in the orange tube, where she first got the feeling that time had slipped.

Eddie was facing Catherine in the slide, side by side, with their sneakers by each other's heads. When they had gone into the tube that evening, the world was quiet, almost timeless in a stillness the wind couldn't touch. The sky was dark, twilight hidden by thick dark rain clouds. The rain came off and on and Eddie listened to the drops knock against the top of the tube with dull little thumps, while Catherine used a key to try and carve her initials inside the plastic slide. After a while, Eddie noticed the stillness wasn't there anymore. She inched her way down and poked her head out from the bottom of the slide. The clouds had thinned, and the sky was a light grey. It sounded as though every bird was singing. She remembered looking up at Catherine in the orange glow of the plastic and telling her to come out and look. "It looks like morning." The world felt alien, eerie in the grey light. It was a timeless colour, a shade that was neither day or night. She could no longer sense what time it was, what day. Was she even in the same place? Was the park the same? The street looked the same, but it didn't feel the same. How could she be sure these were the same streets, the same neighbourhood, the same world? What if time sped up in the tube, she thought to herself, what if days had passed, weeks, or what about years? Eddie

realized she couldn't trust the world. She couldn't trust it would persist after she closed her eyes. She would no longer trust it enough to go walking in the dark.

Eddie stood staring out the kitchen window with a cup of coffee in her hands. The silence of five a.m. wouldn't last. The dark grey shadows in the East would disperse, leaving no choice but for the sky to take on dawn's hue. On the left of the property stood Adrien's shop. The sky was already a lighter shade of grey above it. She looked out over the prairie grass field. It took up most of the area behind the house but, after a couple acres, gave way to forest. Everything was still, as if the earth was holding her breath. Eddie wanted to feel that stillness. Feel it pull everything from her. She felt an urge to leave, to walk out into the twilight, but she knew she wouldn't move.

She closed her eyes and retraced a path through the prairie. She could feel her hand trail across the tops of the grasses, each blade mingling between her fingers, tracing the lines on her palm. She always brought a blanket. If you sat down, the June grass and coneflowers would keep you hidden from view and the soft and feathered heads of the foxtail and rabbit foot would blunt the threat carried in each thorny seedpod crowning the blades of spear grass. Eddie would lie down and stare at the sky from her bower. There she could hear the field laugh and sway in the breeze. She would listen for the ducks and geese that would migrate there each year. If she listened carefully, she could hear them shake the water from their wings. The pond was about half a mile from the house, hidden within the prairie grass. There was only one path that led to the edge of the pond. One opening through the reeds and rushes where you could see the water's algae speckled edge overlap the silty bank. There she could look out across the length of the

pond. She could see the still water, and the bright green and yellow dots of life floating on the surface. She could see across to the other side. It wasn't far. Swimmable. But she didn't like the water. She didn't trust it. She didn't trust herself.

Pieces of a forgotten memory creep into her mind. An assemblage of clips and phrases, and the feelings get caught in Edie's throat, but she still sits with them a moment. Mom would let her go to the park if she brought Angela, and if she promised to watch over her. She remembered weaving branches into crowns under the weeping arms of the giant willow trees, *laurels for a poet*. Lost in afternoon dreams and sunlight's kisses, Edie had missed her sister's dance to the water's edge. She remembered the cry that woke her from her reverie and cleared the clouds from her eyes. The sound of Angie's thrashes tore the willow wreath from her brow. Edie bit her tongue and felt her heart contract as she ran to find her, *terror compelling grass-stained soles*.

I pulled you from the shallows. Little as you were. Mine as you were. I saw your laurel leaves floating in the distance as I felt your arms squeeze me tight.

I looked into your eyes. A silent plea.

Your fear echoed mine. Alone. Together. We locked it deep inside.

We left our weeping willowed Eden. Shame in my heart and terror in our throats, we tiptoed through the door so no one saw we were dripping.

Edie opened her eyes. She was still in the kitchen. Still at the window. The field beckoned to her, or maybe it was the water that was calling. She felt it first in her stomach, then it moved into her arms and her legs. It was a tingling kind of quiver, that made her look down at

her hands. Every nerve vibrating under the weight of indecision. Uncontainable, the tension broke the boundaries of her body, electrifying the air in the room. She stared back out at the field, anticipating the snap that would fissure her reality from every other possible world, pretending she didn't have to choose. She closed her eyes.

Eddie walked recklessly above hollowed ground and the dirt beneath her feet began to collapse. Memories, hushed below the surface, hidden like a collection of warrens, grasped at the soles of her feet. She'd never been deep enough to choke on the heaviness of the soil.

1995. Eddie stood in the stall facing the toilet looking at the white and yellow pill capsule in her hand. She took it between her fingers and gently started to twist the two halves apart. She usually swallowed four or five. When they kicked in, she would feel fuzzy, like she was walking around in a cloud, outside and apart from herself and everyone else. She wouldn't know what was going on, but she didn't really care about not knowing. And that was the best part, not caring. The only problem was that they took a bit to kick in. She had never snorted anything before. She looked at the white powder inside each half of the capsule. She lifted one half to her nose but didn't inhale. She stared at the white concrete block wall behind the toilet. The bell rang, signaling classes were starting. She poured the white powder on to her tongue instead and grabbed the water bottle from her backpack. She chased the powder down and then popped a couple more pills into her mouth. She flushed the toilet and left the stall. Charlotte was putting on eyeliner in the mirror above the sink.

“Christ Eddie, you took forever.”

“Let’s go. If we’re late for English, Anderson’ll make us write a sonnet.”

1986. It was Edie’s birthday. The last one she remembered her mom being around for. Frank gave her a wooden rocking horse. Not the kind you could ride on. This one was small and had a spot to store little things. She would hide her mood ring inside. The rockers were metal and trussed with curly Q designs. The horse was painted white, and it had pinks and greens and blues on its saddle and halter. It was one of the best gifts she ever got.

She and Angela were standing at the counter beside their mom. Angela couldn’t see over the counter. Tommy was trying to return something but the lady at the counter wasn’t letting her. Edie didn’t want to hear them argue. She took Angie’s hand and wandered through the perfume department. She saw a little rocking horse just like the one she got for her birthday. It was on display in the middle of an aisle. The sign read “Free with \$50 Purchase.”

When she opened her eyes again, she was still standing in front of the sink. She regretted Frank asking her to talk to Angela, but she knew she didn’t have a choice. She’d go see her sister. Tip toe through the broken bottles and try not to get cut.

The last time she remembered being at her sister’s place was before Jacob was born, almost six years ago. The smoothness of the living room ceiling popped into her head again. She remembered that most, that, and the hardness of the couch. Angela liked clean lines, industrial

materials, jewel tones and gold. She had a wall-sized print of Klimt's *The Kiss* that hung in her living room. Edie heard her describe her style once as "Scandinavia meets Art Deco in a dark alley with antiseptic." Angela liked everything new, clean, without the marks or stains of living. She had told Edie once that she couldn't live in a space burdened by the emotional baggage of history; she had enough of her own. On that afternoon, six years ago, Edie wasn't focused on Ange's apartment, and she didn't care what kind of pills Angela was keeping in the gold rimmed crystal bowl on the coffee table or why there was a broken glass left on the desk and she didn't dare look at that *Kiss* that seemed at that moment to goad over her a passion she agonizingly regretted. She could only lie on her back on the hard couch and stare at the ceiling.

Edie tried to find something out the kitchen window to distract her from the memories, but everything was still. She couldn't stop that afternoon, six years ago, from replaying in her head.

It was cold. A coldness that sank into her bones. Maybe it was because the ceiling was so bleak in its whiteness, in its nothingness. Maybe it was from the drive into the city, from the way the hoarfrost clung to the trees, or the way the ice crystals sparkled, like cut glass suspended in the air. When she crossed the midtown bridge, she envisioned plowing her car through the railing and flying, nose first, into the ice below. She wondered if the car would sink fast or slow, whether the water would rush in or slowly seep, whether it would rise slowly through the cracks or overtake her in one burst. Whether she would have time to feel the cold. She grieved a little when she realized she made it across.

Angela returned from the kitchen with two cups of tea and placed them on the coffee table. She took a bottle of Jameson's from the side table and poured some into each cup. Then she took a cup and a seat in the chair opposite the couch. "You look like shit, what's the deal?" she said, blowing the steam from her tea.

Edie didn't move, her gaze remaining fixed on the ceiling. "I'm pregnant," she said. Edie waited for her sister to say something. She could feel Angela's eyes staring into her, but she didn't turn her head.

"That's great," Angela said, "you must be thrilled." She took a big gulp from her cup. "This is what you've always wanted, right?"

"Yes." The word lingered in the air, waiting for her to continue, until the breath finally dropped out of it.

"Adrien must be ecstatic."

"Yeah, he is."

"Are you worried because you're older than you wanted to be?"

"What? No. Christ, Ange, I wasn't till you said that." The room went quiet for another moment. "Come on, do you really not see?"

"See what?"

Edie sat up and stared intensely at her sister. "Maybe this is good." She could hear the desperation in her own voice. "If you don't see it, and you know about it—you were there," she paused, "then maybe he won't put it together either."

"Ahh." Angela finished her tea and swapped her cup with the one meant for Edie. "You mean that night at Mike's? That did enter my mind, but that's because I know what happened and I know why it happened. Adrien doesn't know about the party, does he?"

“No.”

“What did you tell him we did that weekend?”

“I definitely didn’t describe it as a party. I think I told him we went shopping, got our nails done, saw some of your friends.” Edie took the empty mug from the table and turned it around slowly in her hands. “What do you mean, you know why it happened?”

“I saw the ovulation test wrapper in my bathroom garbage. It doesn’t take a genius, Edie.”

“I don’t know what I should do.”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean, *nothing*?”

“Exactly that. Nothing.” Edie stared at her blankly. “What do you want to do? Walk up to Adrien and blurt out ‘Hey babe, you know that weekend I spent with my sister? Well, we went to a party, and after drinking my face off, I fucked some random in the bathroom, who I’m pretty sure is actually the father of this baby?’ Does that sound like a good idea to you?”

“Well, that was pretty fucking harsh.”

“That’s the point, Edith. Leave it alone. Bury it deep and don’t think about it again. For all intents and purposes this baby is Adrien’s. You guys have been trying forever and now, by a miracle of God, what do you know, it finally happened.”

“Are you serious?”

“Don’t get all high and mighty on me. Are *you* seriously going to sit there and tell me that the reason you want to be open and honest about this is for Adrien’s sake? Telling him the truth will destroy him. Are you willing to destroy him and your marriage to satisfy your own conscience?”

“Is this seriously how you counsel people?”

“Don’t deflect. This is about you, and this is family. Don’t worry about how I do my job.” Angela smirked and refilled her cup with the Jameson’s bottle. She sat back in her chair and watched her sister struggle with the idea.

“I don’t know if I could lie.”

“You wouldn’t need to lie. You just need to refrain from telling the truth.”

“I don’t think that makes it better. Adrien doesn’t deserve...” Edie couldn’t finish her thought. She put her face in her hands. She knew Angela was right. She knew Angela was likely the only person who would understand. The realization settled in and she felt it twist, like someone had reached down her throat and taken hold of her stomach, clenching it away from her insides. She regretted coming here. She regretted giving Angela her confidence. She took her face from her hands to look at her sister. Angela was staring out the balcony doors. Edie thought she looked quite satisfied.

It had been almost six years since she went to visit her sister that day. As she watched the sky through her kitchen window slowly lighten, a breeze came up and took hold of the prairie field and Edie felt that hand down her throat once more. When Angela moved away, Edie realized she felt safe. For the first time, the feeling of impending doom didn’t overwhelm and choke her. For the first time, she was able to set her guilt aside and not let shame and the fear of discovery taint each time she looked in the mirror, or looked at Jacob, or each time Adrien tried to touch her.

Edie was still staring out across the field when Adrien came into the kitchen. She didn’t hear him and when he slipped his arm around her waist, she dropped her coffee cup. It crashed

loudly into the metal sink but didn't break. "Shit," Edie mumbled as she grabbed the dishcloth to wipe a splash of coffee from her housecoat. "I hope that didn't wake Jake."

"Sorry, love. I didn't realize you were a million miles away." Adrien reached across her and took the mug from the sink. "What were you thinking about?"

"Oh, nothing." Edie watched Adrien as he refilled her mug. He had let his hair grow longer lately and the messy waves were matted in every direction from sleeping.

"I know, I should get it cut," he said, noticing her gaze.

"Oh, I don't know. I kinda like it." She reached up and brushed some hair from his forehead before she took her mug from his hand. "Do you have lots of work this week?"

"So far, it's looking steady. I have a bunch of seasonal changes, tires and oil, then a few guys called and said they were gonna bring in their bikes for fluid checks, oil, whatever to get them good to go. With this weather, everyone wants to make sure they're ready for riding season."

"Hmmm," Edie replied, turning back towards the window. "It definitely feels like spring is close."

"Maybe we should go for a ride. You haven't been on the back of my bike for a while. I miss having you there."

"It hasn't been that long. It was just last summer, wasn't it?"

Adrien shrugged. "Feels like it's been longer. If I have some time this week, I'll get my bike going. Are you at the library or the school today?"

"The library, right after the bus picks up Jake for school." Edie glanced at the clock on the wall above the kitchen table. "You know, I've been thinking, now that Jacob's in school full time, maybe I should look for full-time work."

“You seem pretty busy already, between Jacob, the library, and bookkeeping for the shop...”

“I mean, the library really only needs me during month end, and I don’t *need* to volunteer at the school.”

“Don’t you like volunteering, though?”

“Well, yes, but. . . I don’t know, couldn’t we use the money?” Edie turned from the window and leaned against the sink counter.

“Money’s great, but we’re doing fine. I like that you’re helping at the school. I’m sure Jacob likes having you there.”

“Right.” Edie held her mug to her lips, letting the steam warm her face. “I guess I’m just feeling like a change. I should probably go get him up.” Edie drank the last of her coffee and put her mug in the sink. Before she could leave, Adrien caught her and pulled her toward him.

“Good morning,” he said, lifting her chin with his hand. She stared into his cloudy green eyes and sighed. She moved his hand to her cheek and leaned into it. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to linger in the stillness.

“Morning, love,” she whispered. “I should go wake up Jake.” She pulled away to leave the kitchen but turned back when she reached the threshold. “Did you happen to see my book somewhere? I couldn’t find it this morning. It’s the one with the yellow cover.”

“Sorry,” he said, shaking his head.

“I could have sworn I left it by the armchair...” she mumbled as she left the room.

Eddie sat on the edge of Jacob's bed and watched him sleep. His mouth wasn't completely shut and as he breathed his lower lip trembled, just slightly. His upper lip was shaped like a cupid's bow, the same as hers. *The child inherits the sins of the mother.*

When he was just a baby, Frank used to say that Jake got the bottom of his face from Eddie and the top half from Adrien. Thinking about it, she felt her heart begin to pound and echo in her ears. Each time she remembered those words, they gouged at the wound leaving it larger than it was before. She turned her face away from Jacob and closed her eyes. If only Adrien *was* his father, then maybe Jacob wouldn't have been born this way. Maybe he wouldn't have to struggle. She remembered sitting in the doctor's office. She remembered the look on Dr. Kegan's face and the anxiety in Adrien's voice. She remembered the room felt hollow, or maybe it was just her.

"I think the next step would be to consider a specialist. I can refer Jacob to a speech-language pathologist to get a better sense of what's at play here." Dr. Kegan looked from Eddie to Adrien as she spoke. "Language delay is not unheard of, but since Jacob is now over the age of two, we need to find out why he hasn't reached or really shown any indication of making that developmental milestone with language. How do you feel about that?"

"Of course. I mean, we want to make sure everything is alright—" Edith started.

"Can you give us a sense of what we're talking about here?" Adrien cut her off. "Why isn't he talking yet? I thought his hearing tested fine." Edith reached over and clasped Adrien's hand.

"It did. There is a range of causes, Mr. Wren. The specialist will test Jacob's hearing again, but they will also screen for intellectual disabilities and autism. I know this seems

overwhelming, but we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves here. I will make the referral and we can take it from there."

"Okay."

"Let me just double check I have all the information for the referral." Dr. Kegan flipped through pages in the file in her hand. "Is there any family history of intellectual disabilities, dyslexia, or autism?"

"No, none that I know of." Adrien replied. He turned to Edie. "Did you ever hear of anything on your mom's side?"

Edie was staring out the office window. The sky was blue and she could make out the faint silhouette of white birds, flying high in the distance.

"Edie?"

"No. No history that I know of."

Edie turned back to look at Jacob. It was her fault. When Jacob was still growing inside her, the guilt, the shame, the betrayal, all wormed their way out of her soul and into Jake's mind. That's what he had inherited from her. But before him, everything had been so much darker. She closed her eyes, remembering how much worse it had been before she had him.

Edie saw the blood in the toilet and felt something inside her break. Life poured out from the cracks and left her empty. She curled up on the bathroom floor and stayed like that until she heard the soft tap on the door. She didn't need to tell him. Adrien saw it and him seeing her, reading the shame, the worthlessness, branded on her body, made it worse. He tried to reach for her, put his arms around her, hold her, but she skirted his touch and crawled into bed. She didn't

have any tears; they ran dry months ago. She shrunk back under the covers, away from the room, away from Adrien, away from life. She laid there and thought of all the months before, all the negative pregnancy tests, all the ovulation kits, all the hope she'd gather, only to have it leak out faster each time she broke. The night turned into day and back into night. Each day became defined by her struggle against the light. In the morning, before Adrien would leave, he'd open the blinds and she'd lie there, numbly, staring out at the sky. If there were clouds, she would stay in bed until she had to pee. If the sky were clear she would drag herself from the bed and pull down the blinds before the blue sky could scar her room. Blue skies took too much energy. Blue skies brought tears.

She felt herself spiraling down but she couldn't stop it. She sank further away from herself. She watched her life from outside. She watched Adrien come and check on her. She watched him set the cup of tea on the nightstand, and the crackers and then eventually take them away. She watched as he would push the hair from her face. She recognized the fear and the worry in his eyes, but she couldn't reach him. She saw the defeat in his shoulders when he walked away, but she couldn't ask him to stay. After ten days of Edie being isolated in their bedroom, Adrien confronted her. He opened the blinds and knelt down at the side of the bed. He ran his fingers through her hair and waited till her eyes finally saw him.

“This is enough now, Edie.” His voice trembled. “It's time to get up.”

It was his chin that caught her off guard. He was always so strong; she had never seen him tremble. She had never seen his mouth falter. She felt ashamed, ashamed that she had selfishly abandoned him for the torrent of sorrow in her own mind. She pulled off the blanket and sat up. She reached out her hands and held his face. “I'm so sorry.” Adrien lay his head on her lap and wrapped his arms around her waist.

Two months after the miscarriage Edie went to stay with Angela in the city for the weekend. Adrien practically packed her bag for her when she told him about Angela's invitation.

Edie was quiet on the drive in. She knew it would be nice to get away, but she never felt at ease in the city, not like Ange did. Adrien pulled up in front of Angela's building. "Just relax and try to have fun. I love you." He got out and grabbed her bag from the back seat. "I'd walk you up but I can't park here."

"No, no, I'm fine." She swung her bag onto her shoulder and leaned into his kiss.

Edie could hear the music coming from Ange's place as soon as she got off the elevator. She knocked and then let herself in. Angela was scurrying around the apartment in black underwear and push-up bra, searching for something. Edie noticed how sharp her shoulder blades looked beneath her skin. "I'm trying to find my other damn earring—put your stuff in the bedroom and get ready—we're out on the town tonight!"

Edie went to the bedroom and dropped her bags. She took her makeup case from her purse and saw the box of ovulation tests she had forgotten to take out. She stood there staring at them and for a moment she didn't hear the music anymore or Angela's voice chatting at her from the other room. She opened the period app on her phone and saw the green line that charted ovulation stretched across the calendar from Wednesday to Monday. Today was Friday. She threw her phone on the bed and opened the box at the bottom of her purse.

An observation. An opportunity as easy as peeing on a stick. Two parallel lines, one darker than the other. Two lines that offered a chance.

“Are you almost ready?” Angela’s voice called through the bathroom door.

“What’s the rush? Pour me a drink if you need something to do.”

Eddie was still thinking about those lines as she twisted up her lipstick and rolled the deep ruby red across her lips.

Eddie opened her eyes. She was still in Jacob’s room. She looked over and watched his face as he slept. He looked pale in the grey light of the morning. The clock on the dresser glowed 6:57. She knew she should get him up for school, but she hated waking him. She softly began brushing aside the light brown hair that clung to his forehead, trying to coax him awake. She hated taking sleep away from him. He always fought it so much. When he was just new, a tiny little thing, she would rock him to sleep and let him stay for hours in her arms. Adrien warned her she shouldn’t coddle him. He warned her that Jacob needed to get used to sleeping away from her. He needed to learn how to put himself to sleep, how to console himself. She didn’t listen. When Jacob was big enough for a crib, it would take over two hours to get him to fall asleep in her arms and set him down in the crib without crying. When she would finally emerge from Jacob’s bedroom, Adrien would just look at her and shake his head. She wouldn’t complain, she was too proud to tell him her back was killing her until one day it just became too much. After trying for two and a half hours to get him to sleep, she set him down in his crib awake and walked out of the room. Before her eyes could adjust to the light, he started to cry.

She looked at Adrien, sitting in the corner of the living room, then turned and walked out the front door. She sat on the stoop and braced her head in her hands. A few minutes later, Adrien came and sat beside her. He didn't say anything, he just put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her into him.

Jacob eventually learned to go to sleep at night on his own, but he would only nap in the car or the stroller. She would spend hours a day pushing the stroller and, in the winter, she'd head to the market.

Jacob murmured under her touch, bringing her back to the present. She watched Jacob's tulip lips purse and relax as he struggled to stay asleep. Edie wondered if Logan was still at the market selling soap. She wondered what really happened between him and Angela. Jacob moved his head from under her touch, dissolving the thoughts.

"Come on, sweetie," she said softly, "time to get up." Jacob's eyes eventually blinked open. His usually light brown, almost honey-coloured eyes were dark and glassy in the low light of the bedroom. She waited until she saw them change bright with recognition. "Good morning love," she smiled. She waited until he was completely awake before speaking again. "This morning we have five things to do." Jacob needed a schedule or he would get agitated. Edie held up her hand and lifted her fingers as she counted out their tasks. "Number one is to get dressed. Number two is to eat breakfast. Number three is to brush your teeth. Number four is to pack your backpack and number five is to catch the school bus." As she spoke Jacob took inventory of his stuffed animals. When she said five and wiggled all her fingers, he smiled. Jacob had never spoken, but Edie kept hoping. That was the difficult part, the uncertainty, the not knowing.

"Okay, Jake, I'm going to get your breakfast ready. Can you pick out the clothes you want to wear today?" Jacob nodded and continued organizing his stuffies. "Can you show me

where your clothes are?” Jacob pointed to his dresser. “Okay, great. Come to the kitchen when you’re done, okay?” Jacob nodded again.

One, two, three, four, five

One, two, three, four, five

One, two, three, four, five

One, two, three, four, five

Six.

Edie was in the kitchen when she heard banging, a palm against glass. When she got to Jacob’s room he was at the window. He was looking out at the maple tree. He was shifting his weight from one foot to the other and banging on the window with the palm of his hand. She could hear the crows from the doorway, they were screeching, all at once it seemed. Edie came up beside him and looked out the window. There were three large birds under the tree in the grass and two that she could see in the branches.

Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie.

“It’s okay, Jake,” Edie said soothingly, “the birds are just noisy today. They’re probably fighting over food.” But something held her there, and as she watched she started doubting her words. The scene gave her a strange feeling, like she was intruding, or about to witness something she would regret, but she couldn’t turn away. Another bird swooped in from the forest beyond. She noticed one of the birds on the ground kept trying to fly off but one of its wings

looked strange; it was bent at an odd angle. She narrowed her eyes to try to see it more clearly. The bird dipped one wing, then hopped to one side, then the other. It lowered its head to the ground, then brought it back up. It turned one black eye to the sky, and then the other. It almost looked like a dance, but it wasn't deliberate enough, as though the bird was being compelled, possessed by some force other than itself. Edie noticed the feathers on one side of its head were matted strangely. They didn't shine like the ones on its back. The sunlight caught its head and Edie realized it was blood. The bird wasn't dancing. It was dying. The macabre scene brought Edie back to when she was eleven or twelve, to something she hadn't thought of in a long time.

Frank's voice came like thunder from the other room. Edie and Angela froze, tossed their Barbies to the side of the room and huddled close together on the floor by the bed. Frank stomped into the room. He had a brown and grey bunny clutched in one hand and a destroyed piece of canvas in the other. His eyes spit fire. "Which one of you put this in my studio." He held up the animal and threw the canvas onto the floor. Edie recognized it as one of the sheets from the stack of "incomplete" her dad kept in the corner of his studio. The canvas had a whole corner missing and it was chewed all down the edge. "Look what it did," he roared, shaking the animal in his fist. The rabbit squealed.

"No, dad, don't hurt him!" Edie stood up. "It was me. I found him in the backyard, and he was all alone and he let me hold him and you never use that room anymore and—" The slap to the side of her face made her choke on the rest of her words. Frank took hold of her arm and hauled her out of the room. He dragged her out the back door, the rabbit still in his other hand. He told her to stand against the house and went back inside. She touched her face where he hit her and realized her nose was bleeding. When he came out he had a plastic bag tied with a knot.

Eddie knew the rabbit was inside. Frank tossed the bag onto the grass and grabbed the spade from the side of the shed. “Wild things don’t belong inside,” he said. Then he raised the shovel and brought it down hard on the bag. Eddie ran into the house.

“Why did you tell him!” Eddie screamed at Angela. Tears were streaming down her face.

“I didn’t tell him anything. He found it, I swear!”

Eddie threw herself on the bed and sobbed into the pillows.

Eddie and Jacob stood, fixed to the window. One of the other birds began hopping closer to the injured one. It cocked its head one way, and then the other. “I think that bird is trying to see if the other one is okay. Isn’t that nice?” The bird lunged, aiming its beak at the injured one’s head and the scene came into focus. “Oh—no—that is not helping.” Eddie looked over at Jacob. He was shaking his head back and forth. She quickly re-focused his attention away from the window. Holding his hands, she looked in his eyes with a big smile “Time for breakfast! Can you guess what it is?” Jacob nodded. “Do you think it’s pizza?” Jacob shook his head. “What about pasta?” He shook his head again as they walked over to the kitchen. “Oh look, it’s your favourite—corn flakes with bananas!” Jacob sat at the table and started eating. Eddie let out a breath and went to go find Adrien.

“Why would I get involved? I’m sure they’ll sort it out themselves,” Adrien said into the mirror. He was in the middle of shaving and having to stretch his face made his voice sound funny. “It’s nature, Eddie.”

“I know it’s nature,” she whispered impatiently. “They’re all ganging up—they’re going to kill it. I think you should do something. He looks like he’s suffering.” She stood, shaking one leg, watching him from the bathroom door.

“So, go out there and hit him with a shovel.”

“What? Are you crazy? I can’t do that. What if he’s not that injured? What if he could get better if those other ones just left him alone?”

“Ha! Now, that’s crazy.” Adrien rinsed his face and patted it dry with a towel. “Do you want to bring him inside and nurse him back to health?”

“Ugh, no—don’t be silly, just go out there and scare them away.”

“That won’t do anything.”

“You don’t know that.” Edie glanced out the window to check for the school bus. “I have to get Jacob ready for the bus. Can you please do something?”

Edie watched as the bus drove away. The gravel was dry, and the cloud of fine dust billowed high above the road and lingered there a while. She stood there until the cloud settled back down. When she turned back to the house, she saw Adrien coming from around the back, a black garbage bag in one hand and a metal shovel in the other. The image of her father swinging the shovel flashed into her mind. She remembered the slap. Unconsciously, Edie put a finger to her nose to see if it was bleeding. *I breathe and I still taste red. I smell iron in the soil, and it turns my stomach.* The feelings from that forgotten moment returned. Adrien called it a mercy, but this mercy tastes like violence and leaves the taste of rage on her tongue. *Mercy feels like rage but in death there is no memory.* Edie remembered the crows. Black eyes, anxiously

perched, hungering patiently for death. *They salivate without rage, without pity*, she thought.

Now, all that's left is an opportunity to scavenge on my wounds and you don't offer me a shovel.

Eddie waited over a week before doing what Frank asked her to and going to see Angela. Thursday was a safe bet, far enough from Ange's argument with Frank last Sunday and before the end of the week, which usually marked the end of Ange's sobriety. It was 6:30 when Eddie pressed the button for the eighth floor and waited for the elevator doors to shut. The mirrored walls were inescapable. She rummaged in her purse and found a tinted lip balm. Better than nothing. She ran the gloss across her lips. *Colour distracts us from death*. The colour stood out unabashedly grotesque. She found an old receipt in her purse and quickly dabbed her lips until they covered back into modesty. She left just enough to dissuade anyone from thinking she had just crawled out of a grave. The elevator reached the eighth floor, but before the doors had fully opened Angela had already walked through them.

"Let's get out of here," she smiled. "There's a place nearby that's nice." She pressed the buttons on the wall repeatedly till the doors finally closed.

"Not too nice, I hope." Eddie adjusted the bun on the top of her head.

"Nice to get away to. You look fine, don't worry about it." Angela scrolled through her phone. "They know me there," she added through a sideways grin.

The ceiling in the lounge was low, and the walls were painted dark. The lighting was dim and yellow and made the people in the room look like the furniture, familiar and worn. It was

comfortable, like an old pair of leather shoes or the belly burn of whiskey. On the wall behind where Angela sat hung a picture of four dogs playing poker. They were dressed in white-collared shirts. A small white and beige terrier had on a green visor, and there was a rottweiler smoking a cigar beside a grey hound that was trying to peek at his cards. The Saint Bernard looked like he was leading the pack. Edie surveyed the room, hoping she wouldn't recognize anyone. She turned back to Angela. Edie watched her sister as she assessed the groups of people at each table from behind her wine glass.

“Michael and I broke it off.”

“I didn't know you were seeing anyone. You just moved back.”

“It's been over a month. This started before I left for Toronto. We were keeping it quiet.

He works in my office.”

“Michael the therapist? I thought you left right after you and Logan. . .”

“There was time.”

“What happened?”

“I found out Michael was sleeping with his assistant. I told him the office wasn't his personal harem.”

“I meant what happened with Logan?”

“Forget about it. It doesn't matter.” Angela rolled her neck from side to side.

“Isn't it going to be pretty awkward with Michael at the office now?”

Angela shrugged. “Not as awkward as it's gonna be between him and his wife.” She pulled out a bottle of pills from her purse and shook one out into her palm. Edie wanted to ask her what they were but didn't. Angela washed the pill down with wine and put the bottle back in her purse.

“The novelty of sneaking around was getting old anyway. I got my eye on this bartender here.”

She motioned with her head. Edie looked back over her shoulder towards the bar.

“Who, that kid?”

“He’s not that young.”

“He looks like he’s eighteen, Ange.”

“Twenty-four.”

“Twenty-four.” Edie repeated, turning back to Angela. “That’s almost a ten-year difference.” Angela just laughed in response. Edie took a sip of her drink and felt the rye settle warm in her stomach. She stared up at the cigar in the rottweiler’s mouth. “Do you still smoke?”

“Cigarettes? Sometimes.” Angela pulled a pack out of her purse and tossed it on the table. “I switched to vaping but all those damn flavorings they use make me want to eat all the time. The tobacco flavour isn’t bad but when they’re out, I switch back to these.” Edie looked at the pack on the table.

“Have you talked to Dad since the other day?”

“You mean after he refused to admit any fault, refused to offer any details that might help, and refused to listen to a word I said? Why would I talk to him?”

“I don’t think he means to be that way. You know how he is.”

“You always take his side.”

“That’s not true. I don’t even know what you were fighting about.” Edie watched Angela spin the stem of her wine glass between her thumb and middle finger. Her nails were painted black. “Actually,” Edie added pointedly, “it was lucky I managed to get Jacob out of the room before the yelling started.” Ange didn’t seem to notice the irritation behind Edie’s words.

“Well Adrien was there, he must have filled you in.”

“He just said it was a misunderstanding,” she lied.

“A misunderstanding? Misunderstandings require people to listen. Dad doesn’t want to hear what I have to say. He doesn’t want to hear about the past ‘cause he knows he’s wrong.”

“Are you talking about Mom?”

“Ha! You mean Jennifer.”

“I don’t follow, who’s Jennifer?”

“Jennifer is Mom.” Angela stared at Edie, waiting to see the effect of her words. Edie stared back, without offering any satisfaction. She looked up at the poker game. *The best way to bluff is to believe your own lie.* She wondered how much Angela drank before they met up in the elevator.

“You’re gonna have to start from the beginning. I’ve never heard of a Jennifer before.”

Edie tried to keep her patience. “Are you saying Dad had an affair?”

“Just wait.” Angela stood up. “I need another drink before I get into this and so do you.”

Edie played with her glass, watching the ice at the bottom move from side to side. Maybe she did need another drink. Maybe this was a mistake. She could already feel her blood tingling. Edie thought back. She couldn’t seem to break through the shadows that lurked on the edges of her memories. They crept in and clouded everything, distorted the past and kept her mom from view. She once thought she would always remember her mom’s face, but now she could only recall a figure, an outline of a tall, slim woman with a long dark braid hanging halfway down her back. In the image in her mind, her mother was turned away from her, standing at the window. She was always in darkness, always enigmatic. Maybe it was real. Maybe she was making it all up.

Angela set a drink on the table in front of her. “I’m totally gonna hook up with that bartender,” she said, smiling coyly towards the bar.

“He looks like he’s twelve,” Edie said dryly.

“He does not!” Angela laughed.

“Well, whatever.” Edie tried to hide her impatience. “Tell me this news you have about Mom.”

Angela put her glass on the table and stared at Edie. “Did you know that mom’s real name wasn’t Tommy? When she was in high school her name was Jennifer; I’m not sure exactly when she changed it, but I think it was sometime after that.”

“No, I didn’t know that. Did Dad tell you that?”

“No, that’s the point. I remember Dad saying that her parents lived in the Northeast part of the city, so I started going to high schools there and asking to look through their old yearbooks. I finally found her picture. Dad knew she changed her name, and he knows I’m trying to find her, so why wouldn’t he tell me that?”

“Don’t you think maybe he’s still upset about the whole thing?”

“I don’t think he cared at all.”

“That’s not fair. I remember when he realized she left for good. I remember the look on his face. He cared.”

“Why doesn’t he want me to find her then?”

“Sometimes things should just be left alone. All it’s doing is tearing people apart.” Edie stared at her glass.

“That whole thing the other day wasn’t my fault. I didn’t start anything with him. I need to see if Dad still has some of her stuff. Do you know if he does?”

“What stuff?”

“I don’t know, books, pictures, a journal.”

“I’m not sure. He doesn’t tell me anything and, honestly, I don’t really care.”

“I don’t think you mean that.” Angela twirled the stem of her wine glass. “You can’t just pretend the past didn’t happen.”

“Can’t I?”

“I know there were some boxes of books and stuff in the old house. Maybe there was an album in there. I need to look at Dad’s place, but... ugh,” Angela watched the wine swirl in her glass silently for a minute. “I tried looking for stuff when we were little. I remember when he gave all her clothes away, there was a pink nighty hanging out the top of one box. She used to wear it with a matching pink robe. Do you remember?”

“I’m surprised you remember that. You were still really little when he gave that stuff away. I always thought she looked like a movie star when she wore it.”

“I remember I wanted to keep it. I didn’t, though.”

Edie didn’t say anything. She twisted her glass and watched the ice stay still. She couldn’t remember much of her mom anymore. Certain smells or songs, moments saved like still-frames boxed in the back of her mind, the way her mom wore her hair, maybe, but nothing substantial. Besides the shadows and fragments, Edie could only recall one other memory of her mother. Tommy was sitting on the couch with her legs tucked up beside her. All the light in the room came from the lamp that glowed orange beside her. It was one of those lamps that looked like a tall wooden stair railing, and it had a tabletop sticking out from the middle. The lamp created a thick orange glow around her. She was reading a book and, although Edie couldn’t quite remember her face anymore, she knew she was crying. The book she was holding was thick

with a white cover. Edie remembered the book. She recalled the title on the front was curvy, written in thick black script. She forgot what it said but she remembered seeing it lying around the house. Angela's voice dispelled the image.

“I thought you helped him move. When's the last time you were at the Nutty Club anyway?”

“I wish you wouldn't call it that.”

“I didn't give it that name, it's written on the side of the damn building. I used to love that pink popcorn—do they still make that?”

“I don't know—”

“Oh! and those little three coloured triangle thingies— candy kernels or something.”

“Corn. Candy Corn. Nobody likes that shit.”

“Well, I do.”

“Whatever. What were we talking about?”

“Moving Dad in. Did you unpack his stuff?”

“Adrien and I helped him move. I didn't help unpack though, and I think he left a bunch of stuff behind. I haven't been to his place in a while, but I know he had a bunch of boxes that were still packed the last time I was there. What are you hoping to find?”

“I don't know, something that will give me an idea of where she went. If Dad would just talk to me about it, I might find something. I am so frustrated with him blocking me at every turn. I know why he doesn't want me to find her.”

“I think he's just worried you're gonna get hurt.”

“No, that is not why. This is all about control and he is afraid that if there's another side of the story, he's gonna lose it.”

“That’s just how he is. I don’t think he means to—”

“You know what—Mom knew how he was, too and that’s why she left.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Like hell I don’t.” Angela finished her glass. “I can’t believe you’re taking his side on this, after everything he’s done—”

“I’m not taking sides. People make mistakes—”

“—actually, I can. We shouldn’t talk about this.” Angela stood up and ran her fingers through her hair. “I need another drink anyway.”

“Wait. You still have half a glass. I didn’t come here to fight. If you want to find Mom, I can’t stop you. I just…” Edith hesitated. She noticed Angela’s hands were trembling. She calmed the tone of her voice. “I just don’t want to rehash anything. I don’t want anyone to get hurt. Let sleeping dogs alone, you know.” Edie looked at her pleadingly. Angela sighed and sat down.

“Lie,” she corrected. “It’s let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Whatever, I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“Edith, I’m fine.” They stared at each other from across the table.

“Okay.”

The alcohol made the air feel thick. Edie felt like she was swimming rather than walking. The light in the bathroom hummed a burnt orange that amplified the deep green geometric pattern on the walls. The dark wood doors of the stalls went all the way to the floor. Inside, the stalls were dark, the only light sneaking through from the foot tall gap between the dividing walls and the ceiling. *The darkness hides the dirt, like a coffin hides the rotting flesh of a corpse.*

Eddie let herself slump forward as she sat on the toilet in her oak-veneered casket. Her forehead felt warm against the cool bare skin of her knee. She could smell the tequila on her breath. *Who cares what Mom's name was or is? Who cares where she went or why she left? What was the point in searching for someone who abandoned their entire family? If I could run away and never be found, would I? Wouldn't I? It's just like Angela, so damn selfish, all she ever thinks of is her bloody self. I always got the brunt of it. Dad was always harder on me, what does she even have to complain about?* Eddie heard the shuffle of feet and the lock of the stall door beside her. There was a bang that shook the wall between the stalls and the murmur of voices. One of them sounded like a man. A woman's voice giggled and then hushed and turned into muffled moaning. *You've got to be kidding me.* Eddie caught her sweater in the button of her jeans. She undid them and did them up again. She opened the stall door, letting it bang against the wall. She hated bathrooms. *It was always in a damn bathroom.* Recklessness punched through her stomach and dug its nails into her throat. She wanted to yell and scream, peel the wallpaper until her fingernails broke and bled and screamed for her to stop. Her mind grasped for anything that might distract her. Anything she might relinquish control to. She tried washing the feeling away in the sink. She stared, through the mirror, at the stall door behind her shake, and all she could think of was hands. Hands and hair and clothes coming off and mouths and teeth and skin and porcelain and eyes shut tight.

Eddie closed her eyes. She tried to focus on the rhythm playing through the bathroom speakers. The beat reverberated in her chest. It echoed her pulse, traveled up her spine and throbbed behind her ears. The whole room anticipated, ticked like a bomb. She remembered

another bathroom. She remembered the hard white surfaces vibrating, longing for a tone in which they could shatter. Longing to be other than sink and toilet and tub.

Don't open your eyes, she thought, don't look in the mirror. It won't reflect lies.

The memory strobed in and out. Dark, light. Still, kinetic. Belts pants socks maybe, one shirt—no two but the bra stays on. Skin, hands mouth teeth no thoughts no outside no forward no past no memory no reflection just touch just oblivion only darkness, only the subjugation of sight.

She tried to shake the memory. She pictured the mirror spitting into two. It sizzled and popped like lightening after you see it split the sky

When she opened her eyes there were only stars, oak veneer, and emerald geometric wallpaper.

The shaking in the stall behind her stopped. Edie left the bathroom before the stall door could open.

When Edie came out of the hallway, she saw the bartender leaning over their table. Angela's expression was a perfect manipulation of withholding and desire. A fatal mercenary feigning naivety. Edie felt flames flicker over her cheeks as she walked toward them. "I think I should get going." Angela didn't take her eyes off the bartender.

“I think we need some shots.”

The bartender turned to Edie and smiled before walking back to the bar. He looked seedy, like a rat. His nose was large but thin, and slightly hooked. He had dark eyes that sat deep in their sockets. What did it, though, was the mustache. It coerced all his features into reflecting an essence of pure rodentry. The thin and slightly too long threads that scantily dispersed themselves across his top lip destroyed the depth of his face. She watched him walk away through narrowed eyes and then turned to Angela.

“That’s who you’re sleeping with tonight?”

“It might be fun.” Angie shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe something will come of it.”

“Ugh—an STD maybe.” Edie instantly regretted the condescension in her voice.

“And who are you sleeping with tonight?” Angela’s words caught Edie off guard. Helpless, she felt the heaviness pull her down into the pit. She stared hard at Angela until she regained composure. It made her eyes burn.

The two of us, raised on princess fairy tales. Beauty and the Beast was your favourite. Mine was Sleeping Beauty.

“Why would you ask that?”

“What? It’s an innocent question.”

“You promised me.”

“I promised you I wouldn’t tell anyone.” Angela leaned back from the table. “And I haven’t. I’m talking to *you*.”

“You know that was a mistake—”

“I’m not the one judging you.”

“—one mistake. One.”

“You shouldn’t look at it like that. You wouldn’t have Jacob if it didn’t happen.”

“It haunts me every single day, every single thought—what would happen—I am terrified—” she cut herself short and quickly put herself back together when she saw him coming. Rat-face placed six shot glasses on the table with various shades of amber liquid poured to the rim. Edie could feel her heart pounding in her ears. Angela didn’t miss a beat.

“Did you know that crows, although they mate for life, have been observed to be biologically promiscuous?” She said, smiling up at the bartender. “I just came across an article on that. So interesting.” Her voice fell on him like a satin sheet. “They’re very clever, you know.”

“Lovely,” Edie said. The liquor overflowed the rim of the shot glass. “Cheers!” Edie said, plastering a smile on her face. She took one shot. Then another. Then another. She leaned back and let the room fall away from her. Slowly everything shifted, became plastic, malleable, surreal. She could feel her breath catch in her chest. Edie looked around the room. Everyone’s eyes were dead, glossy, and unblinking. Black, like crows’ eyes. They were all staring past each other, all looking and no one seeing. Their mouths took up most of their faces. A line that seemed to cut their entire face in half, from ear to ear. The bottom half of their faces were all flapping open and closed, all of them speaking, all at once, and nobody hearing. A laugh slipped from her lips. She turned back and saw Angela staring at her through narrowed eyes.

“You better grab us a couple more, Rick.” The bartender smirked and walked away.

“I’m not having any more,” Edie said as she wiped the corner of her mouth with the inside of her thumb. She took her wallet from her purse. “I have to go. This is silly.” She put

cash down on the table and grabbed Angela's cigarette pack that was still there. She took one out and threw the pack back.

"You'll need a lighter for that."

"I'm not going to light it." Edie held the cigarette up to her nose and inhaled deeply. "I just like the smell. It's raisins, you know." She let out half a laugh. "It smells like raisins."

"Why don't you stop trying to be so perfect, Edie."

"What *should* I try to be?" She looked at the cigarette in her hands and shrugged. "I'm just tired, Ange. I'm not trying to be perfect. I'm just trying to make it through, that's it. I'm just trying to find a damn reason."

"This all goes back to Dad, and you never want to see it. You never want to believe me."

"This has nothing to do with Dad," Edie cut in. She could feel the needles begin to poke at her cheeks.

"This has everything to do with him." Angela's voice was getting louder. "You don't know what it was like, you took off as soon as you were old enough."

"What *what* was like? I was there, I grew up with you."

"After you left. Living there—you just don't know."

"Well tell me then."

"He said she left because of me. He said it was my fault. He said after I was born, she was never the same. He said I destroyed her, that I stole her light."

Edie stared at Angela, trying to decipher how much salt she should swallow along with her words. "You can't actually believe that—"

"But I do. I do. You didn't see his face when he said it. You didn't see the hate in his eyes. Who says that? Who hates their own child? That's why I have to find her."

“She left us.” Edie said it slowly. She clenched and unclenched her teeth.

“She left because of him.”

“If he was so bad, why did she leave us with him? Why didn’t she ever check to see if we were okay?” They stared across the table at each other.

“When I find her, I’ll ask her that.”

The room was getting blurry around the edges and the halos around the wall sconces were growing larger. Edie sighed. “I’m getting outta here.” She tapped the cigarette on the table and then tucked it behind her ear. “Good night, Angela.”

“Don’t hold on to that too tight.” Edie heard her call after.

Truth spills out at the seams.

Edie felt separate from her body. There was a distance. There was a numbness. She moved her hand so she could tell whether it was resting on her lap or on the seat beside her. The streetlights above faded in and out as the cab kept driving. Maybe she was the problem. Why couldn’t she help this resentment, why couldn’t she stop it from tainting her, from suffocating her. She felt it, though, the thought that she refused to think. She sensed it lingering in her periphery, having sustained itself through all her neglect, through all her self-control. The alcohol dulled her defences, and she could no longer help but see it straight on. It wasn’t the crisp, clean void beyond the horizon that struck her, or the chasm that flaunted emptiness. What horrified her was her complete surrender to it.

It was an emptying. The alcohol made self-preservation hard. She had no choice but to remember all the shadows she had buried deep in her pockets. The uncertainty of it all became

caught in her chest. *Did my skin rip from the outside or from within? Was I holding the scissors against my wrist, or were you? Is the monster in my mind or down the hall? But it was your palm against my face and my blood that fell from my nose and into my hand. Those jeans already went through the wash and the ink runs off the note I forgot you left in my pocket. It flows down into the earth. Should I make a home in that grave too? Live inside that corpse while condemning this body to die?* Edie let her mind unravel forgetting the panic that always followed. A fluttering in her throat quickly reminded her and she began gathering the tendrils of her thoughts. She quickly spun everything together, a giant dark mass. *I will bury our dead*, she said to herself. *I will not turn away and allow this resurrection. I will swing the shovel and smash the bony hand of memory when I see it break through the dirt.*

Soon the streetlights ended and there was only darkness outside the car window. The cab's headlights couldn't pierce the black void that loomed beyond their reach. Edie stared into the blackness. She felt the dark mass perch itself on her soul. *How can nothing weigh so much?*

Edie stood at the end of her driveway, wavered, stepped, recalculated, and stood again, listening to the sound of crunching gravel fade into the distance.

The house looked quiet. The front light beamed its halo piously, the night sky its cathedral.

She walked around to the backyard and stood, looking out over the field, refusing to name the thoughts gnawing at her or acknowledge the lurking ugliness.

She remembered the hunger in Angie's eyes.

She wanted to feel that hunger.

But emotions are weakness, an irrational burden. Always in need of control. To surrender is a tragedy.

Adrien was always so good at not letting emotions skew his judgement, not letting them affect him, like she let blue eyes and daydreams distract her.

There was no escape in those anymore. That was the tragedy.

The realization woke something deep inside, an irritation in the pit of her stomach. She felt it breathe and expand, pushing itself out. She could feel it uncoil a hundred arms and take hold of her lungs and her heart. It slid up around her shoulders and under her arms, tentacles spiraling, circling her bones to her wrists. She felt it pool in her fingertips, heavy and thick. She couldn't see the field, or where the grass met the sky. She couldn't see the stars. Everything became black. She turned back toward the house. She needed to wash this heaviness away.

She slipped off her shoes before she opened the door. She remembered to lift the back door as she closed it, so it wouldn't make noise scraping against the frame. She set her purse and shoes on the floor and tiptoed across the kitchen and down the hall. She stopped outside Jacob's room and held her breath, waiting to hear the sound of his breathing. She did, so she continued down the hall to her bedroom. She could see the outline of Adrien on the bed. She walked into

the bathroom and shut the door before she turned on the light and let out her breath. She took off her clothes, without looking in the mirror, and stepped into the shower.

Eddie stood with her eyes shut, feeling the water as it ran over her head and her shoulders and then down her back. She wished it would cover more of her. She didn't want to feel her skin anymore. She turned the water warmer so the steam would thicken the air. But it wasn't what was outside. It was on the inside, right there, always on the cusp. It was an overwhelming despair, and it ceaselessly clawed its way up her throat. She placed her hand flat on her chest to force it back down but here, without an outside, she didn't need to. She felt the soft sob slip out without coercion, without violence. It was the sound of a grief that she knew and, at the same time, a grief that was so alien. The sound of mourning a part of yourself that you didn't know existed. The anguish flowed like the water over her head.

Eddie lay on her back under the covers, looking up at the ceiling. She couldn't seem to get the blankets tight enough. They hovered just above her skin on an air current of ice. She tried to be still, to prevent the air's icy needles from eviscerating her skin. When Adrien's leg brushed against her foot it felt like a flame. The ripple of warmth radiated up her leg and made her shiver. She plunged both her feet between his calves. Half asleep, he rolled over, moving the blankets, so his body was right against hers, his leg resting across her thighs. She felt her body melt into his. She shuddered as her parched body drank his warmth. The sensation was euphoric. She closed her eyes.

"Your hair is damp," he muttered, sleepily. He brought the covers up close under her chin.

"I'm so cold," she whispered. He tightened his arm around her.

His hand moved down from her shoulder and found her breast. Before she could stop herself, her mind quickly redrew the borders of her body and began its retreat. She could feel him stiffen against her thigh and she felt herself recoil deeper inside, abandoning her body to the fight. Her eyes snapped open. He moved his hand across her nipple. She felt her skin crawl, a thousand tiny needles mockingly danced across her body. She gently nudged his hand off and tilted her body away from him. He moved closer to her, wrapping his hand around her waist, his body cupped against hers. She turned away further, almost all the way onto her stomach. Burying her arms beneath her chest, she closed her eyes tightly, hoping this deflection would silently define her position. She heard him sigh and turn away. Something inside unfurled but lay remorseful and guilt-ridden, heavy in her chest. *We put on our rose-coloured glasses and waltz across the room pretending the walls aren't on fire.*

Eddie lay in the bed awake letting the red glowing digits of the clock-radio burn into her retinas. There was a time when touch didn't invade. When it didn't rally against her in order to occupy. In order to lay claim. When she didn't feel disdain, when she didn't flinch with absent anonymity. When did this love start taking so much of her? Why did his attempt to tend her wounds only widen the cuts, only leave salt in the abrasions? At first, she was grateful for the sting, it reminded her to breathe, it reassured her she could still feel something. *But I don't want to feel this anymore, she thought, every touch takes a piece from me and I don't have any more of me left.* The thought echoed, emphasizing the void she felt in her chest. She quickly pushed the thought out, down, down, down, chastising her selfishness, beating it down into her throat. How could she be so cruel to him, her husband, the man who grounded her, kept her safe? How could she be so cold? *Just lean into the pleasure, she told herself. If she could just get past*

the initial irritations, the pin pricks, past a consciousness of skin or fingertip pressure, beyond the thought of touch as an invasion of borders, beyond any thought. Just the action, *just a dissolution of the space between him and me*, just the knee-jerk reaction of her body desperate to remember more than skin, a body compelled by the memory of more than touch.

Eddie remembered when she first met Adrien. It wasn't his eyes that struck her. It was how the air in the room would change, each molecule demanding she pay attention to the space slowly contracting between her body and his. She would feel he was in the room before she would see him. She remembered how it happened the first week she started working at his dad's shop.

Adrien leaned over her shoulder from behind her chair and put a receipt on the desk. She felt the hairs on her neck tingle.

"Can you make sure to add this under expenses? It didn't come in with the weekly order, so I had to pick it up separately."

"Mm-hmm." Eddie nodded and continued working.

"My dad still has you working on paper, eh? I told him it would be easier to use a computer, but old dogs I guess." Adrien took the schedule book and walked around to the front of the desk.

"Oh, I don't mind, really. Your dad's kept the books pretty organized, so it's been easy for me." Eddie watched him look over the appointments for the day. He had big hands. The ends of all his fingers were stained black with grease. Half of the nail on his right index finger was dark purple at the cuticle. The top half of his coveralls was tied by the sleeves around his waist,

and he was wearing a white cotton t-shirt. She could see the top of a pack of cigarettes sticking out of the front pocket. Adrien shut the schedule book and spun it back to where it was.

“Well, if you come across anything you need clarification on, let me know. I might be able to help.” Edie nodded and looked at him, waiting, thinking he was going to say something else. He looked back at her. She smiled and turned her attention back on the ledger book, but she could feel him still standing at the desk in front of her.

“Have you had lunch yet?”

“No, I usually grab a muffin across the street at around one.”

“Mind if I tag along?”

“Not at all.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Edie thought about how the muffins turned into walks after work, then dinners, then movies. She met his mom and one day he asked to meet her parents. She remembered when she told Adrien about how her mom had left them. It was the first time she ever cried about it. She remembered that she felt like such a fool for letting him see that kind of vulnerability. The next day after work he drove her to a bridge, just outside town, that had steep rocky banks down to the river below. He parked on the edge and hopped out, grabbing a twelve pack of bottles from the back of his truck. He opened her door and held out his hand.

“This is your plan? Drinking on a bridge? You sure know how to treat a lady.”

“These aren’t for drinking, they’re empty. Come on. Get out, I’ll show you.” Edie grabbed onto his hand and jumped out. He led her to the edge of the bank and put the bottles at

their feet. “Sometimes, I get frustrated with my dad. I think he doesn’t value my time enough. I wish he would let me take charge a bit more. Trust that I can make the business better. It can be hard working with family. When I feel like I’ve been pushed too far for too long I grab a case of empties and drive here.” Adrien pulled a bottle from the box, lightly tossed it up and down in one hand a couple times and then pulled his shoulder back and threw the bottle across the bank. They both watched it smash across the rocks, little bits of glass tinkled down through all the crevices. “I thought maybe, after talking about your mom the other night, you might need to smash some bottles too.” Edie hadn’t expected that. She turned and looked at him, thinking she would see his usual goofy grin, but he was biting the corner of his upper lip instead. His eyes were soft, squinting against the sun getting low in the sky. She reached up, grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled his mouth to hers. Then she grabbed a bottle from the box and hurled it down the bank. This time when she looked back at him after it smashed, he was laughing. She was laughing too. She couldn’t help it. She couldn’t explain it but breaking that glass made her feel powerful, alive. She threw the rest of the bottles as the sun slowly dipped below the trees in the distance.

The vibration of her cell phone on the bedside table dissolved her musing. She picked it up and saw a text from Angela: Did you make it home okay? Edie typed in Yup and put the phone back down. She let her eyes close and fell asleep thinking about the sound of braking glass shattering down a rocky bank.

1988. Edie heard a smash from her dad's bedroom. She sat up and looked to see if Angela had woken up beside her. She was still sleeping so Edie slipped off the bed and tiptoed down the hall, making sure not to step on the parts of the floor she knew would squeak. She tried to keep most of herself hidden as she peaked in the doorway of her dad's bedroom. Her dad was sitting at mum's dressing table. Well, the dressing table that her mother used to sit at when she was still there. There were pieces of broken glass on the floor. Dad was ripping pages of a book into tiny pieces, and the pieces were falling like confetti onto the broken glass. Edie didn't say anything. She tried not to breathe. Her dad suddenly pushed what was left of the book onto the floor. The noise made her heart jump. She felt the fear move electric through her veins until it stopped dead at the tips of her fingers. She pressed her thumbs against each finger to make the tingling go away before she tip-toed back to her room.

The next morning, when Edie came to the kitchen for breakfast, her dad was already at the table. His eyes had red rings around them. "Dad, when something rips, where does it go?"

"Where does what go?"

"The rip, where does that go?"

"It doesn't go anywhere. It was whole and now it's a part."

"Oh, I understand." *But I didn't.*

The clouds roll in.

Edie told Frank she would pick up his painting supplies and drop them off for him since there was too much for him to carry on his bike. "One other thing," she said into the phone. She

hesitated but decided the conversation wouldn't be easier in person. "Do you know why Tommy left?" There was silence on the other end. She was thankful she couldn't see his face.

"Did you talk to Angela? Did she put you up to this? I don't want to talk about it."

"She told me you said it was her fault."

"I don't remember saying that. Why would I tell her that?"

"I don't know." Edie sighed. "Maybe it was when you were drinking," she added softly.

"I don't think I would have said that." His voice was cold.

"It doesn't matter. Do you know why she did? Did she ever tell you or leave a note at least?"

"When Tommy wanted to do something, she did it. She didn't think about me, or you girls. She was impulsive. We loved each other once, and then, at some point, I guess, we just stopped."

"That's it? That's all you have?"

"She was ready to move on. It was a long time ago and I've moved on too—we all have. Do we really need to talk about this?"

"People stop loving each other all the time. They don't abandon their families over it."

"Well, I'm not sure I completely agree with you there—"

"She left half her stuff."

"I think it happens more than you—"

"She didn't say goodbye."

Silence carved a chasm between them.

"Never mind." Her voice echoed across the distance. "Dad, did she ever tell you why?"

"No. That wasn't her way. Tommy was never one for explanations, or goodbyes."

“You know what—this is crazy. I don’t even know why I’m asking. I don’t know why Ange is so stuck on finding her, and I don’t care. If she wants information, she can talk to you.”

“I don’t have information. I haven’t hidden anything from you girls.”

“What about her name.”

“She was always Tommy to me. That’s who she was when I met her.”

“Angela’s trying to find some of her stuff. Did you keep anything?”

“No.”

“Not even a photo album?”

“No. If you recall, we didn’t have much. Most of the time we were just scraping by. It’s been thirty years, Edith.”

“When I drop off your stuff can I look through some of the boxes?”

“I’ve got a lot of works in progress right now. Can’t it wait? I don’t like anyone looking at my pieces before they’re done—”

“I’ll see you Thursday.” She didn’t wait for a reply before hanging up.

Edie stood, staring out the front window. Her head still hurt from the night before. When she woke up, Adrien had already left to work. She didn’t feel right. She felt wrong. Shamefully wrong. Like a dirtbag. She had lost her patience with Jacob over eating his cereal. It was her fault, though, she had run out of bananas and used strawberries instead and she forgot to prepare him for the change. It took all of her energy to get him back on track and onto the bus for school. She hadn’t even seen Adrien. He was gone to the shop before she woke up. She looked out at the empty planters on the front steps. It was almost June and she hadn’t even thought about planting them. She remembered digging up plants with Jacob last year. Angela would have still been in Toronto and Edie wouldn’t have had to think about the past. She wouldn’t have had to think

about forgotten music boxes and bathroom mistakes. She didn't want to think about the person she had been. She just wanted to be.

Eddie knew she had to leave for work, but she stayed there, staring out the front window. She wanted to be outside. She needed to feel the air. She needed to feel the earth. It didn't really matter if she was late, or even if she went in at all. It was month end, but she had kept on top of the library bookkeeping. She hesitated a moment and then surrendered to the pull of the earth. Surrender always felt like a kind of defeat before she remembered the meaninglessness of it all. She felt the shadows come ever closer. Scavenged and piecemeal, this home was only ever borrowed. This haven, now hollowed of meaning. Outside, the sky screamed as opaque onyx shadows fissure the air. Like in her dreams. Like in her memories.

Eddie let her hand trail across the tops of the tall grass. The morning air must have been musing about October. She walked down the path and stood at the edge of the pond. The water reflected the sky in the dim morning light. *Let it come. Let it come. This surrender is no longer defeat. Only courage. Only peace.* She slipped one foot from her sandal and dipped it into the pond. She breathed in sharply. That breath coloured every previous breath shallow. Barely alive. Maybe when she slept, she stopped breathing all together. *Maybe it's the pain that makes us feel alive.* She winced but held her toes under until they were numb. Until she didn't feel them anymore. Until she didn't feel anything anymore. Not even sadness. There was only a muted pressure. Just enough of a touch to remind her of the emptiness. The hollow spaces inside her bones where the memories echoed but could never escape. She felt the tears begin to well, not from pain or self-pity or remonstrance or any other emotion, but from the vacuum left in their place. She felt obscure and detached. Like an ogre. Like a monster. One who breaths and is not alive. One who sees without feeling. One who feels without feeling. *I am so sick of myself.*

Why won't this mind stop regurgitating and just digest. Leper. Must I swallow this disease, so it won't touch you? So I can't drown you in me.

She couldn't feel her feet anymore. The water made them numb. She didn't look down, she looked straight out across the water. On the banks, new growth sprouted from the autumn's aftermath. Each year would build upon the previous year's dead. Each life digesting the lives that came before it in an endless, purposeless cycle. What did it matter if one blade of grass withered? If they all withered? Energy into the soil, food for others' roots, food for the worms. The darkness of the earth lured with the temptation of rest. And she was just so tired. The tears brimmed over and covered her face.

Eddie's life passed through her mind, every emotion, every situation, every failure and desire. None of it mattered. None of it meant anything. She was still here. She was still alive. She was still fine—always still fine. Nothing more than a speck, a piece of dust floating through existence. *What am I because of this life? This rotten house of bones. But what am I without it? What would happen if I just gave in? If I just gave up on it all?*

She remembered she was holding her breath. Her pockets full of stones, she closed her eyes and walked in. The water rose slowly, the back of her knees, the base of her hips, the soft curved paunch of her stomach, the water found all the parts of her body she kept hidden. She swallowed the shock of cold, slowly inhaling the discomfort. As the water rose so did the weight on her chest. She felt it rise to below her ears and then finally become swept away in her hair, that slowly rose above her head in the water. When she couldn't hold it any longer, she let her breath out, slowly, and felt the bubbles travel up against her face on their way to the surface. If she could just feel this weightless forever. If she could just be in this state, breath in this state. But it couldn't last. Without air the heaviness started setting back in. Panic. Reality. Who would

find her like this? Did her hair reach the surface of the water? Would Adrien see the damp nest and run in? What about Jacob?

Jacob.

His smile popped into her head. How it was never just his mouth but would affect his whole face. Light it up. It was the smile of an open heart. It revealed all his innocence, all his gentleness. So genuine, so whole. Edie wished she could drink that smile, inhale that curiosity, that propensity for the world, before time eroded it. Before time jaded it. But it wasn't time, she thought, it was her. She was the one eroding and eroded. She was the one crumbling. Could she see the world as it really was? Without seeing it through the veil of her own despair. Without painting it black? Without painting it with death?

She inhaled with a gasp and opened her eyes. She looked down at her feet, still only covered in an inch of water. She felt the heaviness move into her chest, felt it claw and slither up into her throat. It stung her eyes and twitched the edges of her mouth.

=====

PART TWO: FRANK

On the fourth floor of the old Nutty Club building, a large canvas flew across the studio. The corner hit the floor first and the crack of the wooden stretcher bars echoed in the room.

The easel went next, followed by the pail of brushes that exploded across the floor like a bomb. The large paddle brush slid across the wood plank floor. The smaller brushes and palette knives flew like shrapnel from the bucket, scattering violently. The only thing left on the small table in the middle of the room was a mason jar. The outside was painted red and there was a small handprint on one side in white. Propped inside, a construction paper flower taped to a plastic drinking straw hung its head. Each wilted yellow petal when uncurled, spelled out in large print the standard adjectives that made Dad best: caring, special, loving, nice, cuddly.

I.

1963. There was a dead fish lying on newspaper on the kitchen table. The dead eye stared up at the ceiling. Deidre was standing on the other side of the kitchen staring at it. She was nervously chewing her nails and quickly shifting her eyes from the fish to Frank and then the fish again. Her eyes were wide, wild. They could hear the radio broadcast from the other room. *Sports columnists predict Sonny Liston will once again defeat Floyd Patterson and remain the Heavyweight Champion of the World.* They both knew that Clyde would keep his word; that he wouldn't let her leave that kitchen until she cooked that fish for him. Frank was only ten and he

hadn't learned to hate Clyde so much yet. A knife lay on the kitchen counter. "It's okay Mama," he said, "I can do it."

The nuns with their rulers and Clyde with his belt.

There was a small safe place behind his mother's knees.

Frank kept the art books he stole from the library under his bed.

The only time he saw his mom fight back was when she threw a loaf of bread at Clyde's head.

II.

Colour affected him almost too much. He first discovered oil pastels in middle school and they became his favourite. Holding the colours, he felt like a sculptor, his hands shaping the colour across the paper: red, yellow, orange. He pushed and kneaded the oils into the sky. There wouldn't be any part of the paper left untouched. He filled the entire scene with colour, a thick overflowing river, an image, a reality he could control with his hands. It was intoxicating, this colour, this reality. *When you fill your page with colour, there is no room for shadow.* A naive mistake. Eventually the shadow crept in, furtive and unassuming. It carved a hole in his chest and showed him his mistake. He tore down each horizon until the page became a universe and all he could see was the sun.

III.

It was late summer, and he was driving west into the orange sky. Tree planting all summer allowed him to paint the rest of the year. The angle of the sun made her a silhouette on the side

of the highway. She was standing with her arm thrust towards the road and her thumb pointed up to the sky.

In the passenger seat, the sun caught her face and her skin shimmered. She reminded him of oil pastels that had sat in the sun, glossy, malleable, and almost unbearably vibrant. From that day on, they just stayed together. They never really spoke about it, she just never left until that day, almost twelve years and two kids later, that she did.

IV.

Winter's dull light left her gold and gleam tawdry. It stayed too long in his mouth and became bitter. Desperately he tried to fix it, tried to claim back his muse and drink reality into oblivion. But only shame settled in. Curled up and made a feast deep in the pit of his longing, forever leaving him hungry. So he swallowed more and more, frantically trying to bury the feeling, until he felt her catch in his throat and all the colours spilled out onto the floor.

Still dull.

Still tawdry.

Blind, he waited for her resurrection, a creation the sunlight could no longer burnish. He recedes into this image, into her image but the colours slip and seep into the cracks. He couldn't preserve their essence, her essence.

He felt nostalgia twist and choke his chest. Too long in his heart, it became bitter.

The glow of those late summer skies washed out in the sink, like the unused paint on his palette. He could no longer feel the electric current he once had, looking in her eyes. The world, the one Frank had painted a shimmering gold, had turned to faded tones of jade. Like flaking paint off a

wall, the illusion was slowly stripped, along with his inspiration. The image of Tommy left him years before her body did.

V.

Her void swallowed any muse, and he was forced to abandon his brushes. He swallowed his bitter heart and got a real job. Eleven at night to five in the morning at the bakery allowed him to see the girls off to school. Nine to two unloading supply trucks gave him an hour nap before they got back home.

There were always others, even before Tommy left, but no one could drive away the ennui. He had really thought there was a chance with Kate, or maybe he was thinking of Erin, it doesn't really matter, they were all the same, none of them sparkled like Tommy once had. None of them was enough to fuel the desperate and insatiable void at the center of his creative being. None of them could move him to anything more than drink. Catherine stuck around the longest, but she eventually left him like the others. His daughters drifted farther away. They didn't seem to want anything to do with him either. Edith moved out as soon as she could. Then Angela left too, and it was only him there in that house, haunted by everyone else and without any room left to think.

VI.

They wouldn't let him make a call, but he wouldn't have wanted to hear his daughter's sigh of disapproval anyway. After the DUI charge, he couldn't afford to get his licence back so he decided he would just never drive again. He sold the house and rented some warehouse space, a studio so he could really paint again. He bought a bicycle and fixed it up with a basket and some

racks. He rehearsed what he would tell people, that he was just doing his part for the environment, but nobody asked.

Nobody noticed when he stopped painting.

Nobody noticed his new place didn't have a shower.

Nobody noticed a drunk on a bicycle.

He didn't have a problem. Some people used sleeping pills. He preferred brandy. Plus, there was an aesthetic to it. The large globe goblet, the rich mahogany liquid. It kissed all his senses goodnight as it gently swaddled his mind and rocked him into numbness. He didn't think of those kisses as poison.

VII.

The doctor said his good eye had been able to compensate well. Too well. That was why he didn't notice it sooner. That was how he missed the truck in his periphery. He had been lucky. It could have been much worse.

Worse like finding out you have glaucoma.

Worse like being too drunk too often to notice.

Worse like catching it too late.

Worse like a creator of worlds who can only see in sepia.

Frank stared in the mirror. He struggled to re-focus, as if he might gain back the vibrancy of colour or clarity by sheer will alone. He could no longer distinguish the iris from the pupil. The fading blue of his iris seemed to be leaking into the centre, clouding contrast, clouding sight. Clouding fucking everything. Everything had become varying shades of sepia. He pulled the mirror off the wall and threw it to the floor. *How can you create what you can no longer see?*

Three days later, the canvas still lay tossed on the floor. Beside it, a yellow book cover lay eviscerated, its pages strewn wildly across the room. The shards of mirror that lay shattered on the floor reflected fragments of space, excised from time:

Yellow flower petals settled in a stream of colour that had leaked off its canvas months ago.

The kind of rope you use to pull a child's sled, yellow, with the green flecks in it.

The brass feet of a wooden pedestal table tipped onto its side.

Feet dangling motionless, three inches above the narrow strip hardwood floor.

=====

Eddie finds the shattered mirror and its rumination. The supplies fall from her arms. No. No. No no no no no——she gets up on the same table. It takes both her hands to squeeze the scissors. His body falls into the yellow, silver, paper fragments that circumscribe the room.

Somehow cold fingers find their purpose and dial the number and silent screams become siren screams and words become a moot point. Pages become a moot point. Understanding, intention, perspective become irrelevant beneath this shadow.

Death empties time from the room. In the stillness, the finality of the moment is now all that can be.

Angela silently steps into the room beside her. She slips her hand into Edie's as ashes of what used to be fall like rain around them. Under a sky split open, intentions oxidize and memory knee-jerks quick to suture the tear.

Tears turn ash into mud. Thankful for concealment, relief stifles a sigh and scuttles underneath with her tail between her legs.

Though these fissures will swallow us whole, was it worth it to see to our cores?

Fragmentation persists, although was it only the pieces she hated that died with him?

Decay pulls itself up from the ground and stirs the echoes in these hollow bones.

“You can’t be serious. No—no. I don’t believe you, Angela. It was like thirty-two hours ago—he was... — in this fucking room. Who cares about Mom’s stuff? You should be concerned with why *this* happened. Why would he do *this*?”

“You know what—cut the self-righteous crap. I’m obviously looking for something that will tell us that. I’m just saying to also keep an eye out for anything relating to mom.”

“Whatever, let’s just get this over with. The building is going to charge us another month or lock us out and keep what’s here.”

“Leave it to Frank to wait till the end of the month.”

“Just shut up, Ange.” Edie looked around the room. “I’ll start packing up the desk. Can you start on the books over there?”

“Sure.” Fragments of mirror crunched under Angela’s shoes as she walked across the room. “This place is a mess. What’s all this ripped paper on the floor?” She bent down and picked up one of the pieces. “They’re pages from a book.”

“Yeah. It was mine—well, it was from the library, actually. He must have taken it last time he was over. I don’t understand why he would tear it up.”

Angela found the cover and picked it up. “It’s Sylvia Plath. That’s why. Frank couldn’t handle Plath. He said mom was obsessed with her. I think he even blamed mom’s leaving us on that book. He said when mom read her journals, it changed her, it made her think too much, it made her sad, a heavy kind of sad. Like she was always carrying something around that wasn’t there before. He said she stopped smiling.”

“How do you know that? He told you that? When did he tell you that?”

“I think it was when I started university—and I think he was drunk—but still the good kind of drunk, you know, before the angry drunk would rear its ugly head. I was moving out and looking through the books in the spare room—the old studio. I don’t think he realized he still had it. He was more open then. If you caught him at the right moment, he would sometimes talk

about her. But that was before I really started trying to find her and before he knew I wanted to find her.”

“If he hated Plath so much, why take my book?”

Angela shrugged. “Maybe he was worried it’d do the same to you?” Angela let go of the page. She didn’t watch it float down onto the others. “You know, there’s no shower in this place.”

“What?”

“There’s no shower. Was Dad allowed to be living here?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. There’s a YMCA card on the desk here. I’m guessing he showered there. Did he ever ask you for money?”

“Are you kidding? I don’t think that man asked anyone for anything ever. Besides, I can’t imagine he’d want to give up this starving artist image.” Angela started looking through a pile of books stacked in the far corner of the room.

“I don’t think he was starving. His paintings were selling. That’s what he said, anyway.”

“Yeah, he said a lot of things.”

Deep in the desk drawer, Edie found a stack of yellowing envelopes bound with an elastic band. She opened the first one.

Dear Frank, I think I owe you an explanation...

Edie didn’t read further. She folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope. She placed the envelope on top of the others and slowly re-twisted the elastic band around them. Edie turned and saw Angela’s back was to her. She was still boxing stacks of books on the other side of the room. Edie looked down at the letters in her hands. She tried to swallow all the thoughts that had

started to scream inside her head. She couldn't think straight. She didn't think. She didn't hesitate. She quietly tucked the stack of letters deep into the bottom of her bag.

=====

Part Three: Angela

Angela stormed out of the house. “Hopefully I crash my car on the way home and die, so you all won’t have to deal with me anymore!” Angela screamed the words before she slammed the door to her blue Mustang. She slammed the steering wheel with the palm of her hand over and over until her frustration ran out of breath. She turned the key, slammed her foot on the clutch, shifted into first and hit the gas. The tires slipped on the gravel and then caught. Thoughts berated her over and over. *Why did I fucking move back here? I should have stayed in Toronto. Why do I even try with him? Edie always takes his side. She always bows her head and turns away. She always puts up with all his damn lies. She hasn’t changed.* Angela remembered how Edie’s voice had changed when she called to tell her that she was moving away. At first, she thought it was relief, but there was something more, something heavier, a hunger just below the surface, there was jealousy. It was the same when she first told Edie she was seeing Logan—the soap man, Edie had always called him. And tonight, before she got into the fight with Frank, before she stormed out of Edie’s house, Angela recognized it again. A coldness and a hunger, a bitterness in Edie’s eyes whenever she looked at her. Angela tried to think of a time it wasn’t like that between them, but it always seemed to be there, a detached stiffness. Even when they were little.

Angela was nine and she was sitting cross-legged on the floor by the bed, flipping through magazines. She wasn’t interested in what the articles had to say. She wanted the pretty pictures, the glamour, the perfume that inspired the satin-gowned model’s sultry stare, or the jewel-encrusted bustier that promised confidence, power, and seduction. Each time she came

across a full-page luxury clothing brand or perfume ad she would carefully rip the page out and put it into a pile she kept tucked between books in the small bookshelf in her and Edie's room.

"One day, I'm going to have everything," she said to Edie.

"Well, you'll have a lot of pictures of everything."

"You'll see, Edie. I'm going to have lots of money and be able to buy whatever I want. I'll live in Paris or New York. I'll have more money than you."

"No, you won't."

"Bet you I will. I bet you I'll make a million dollars by the time I'm 23." Angela grabbed a piece of paper and wrote out the words: I, Angela Gallo, bet my sister Edith Gallo that I will make \$1,000,000.00 by age 23. Then she signed the bottom and passed the paper to Edie. "Ok, now sign it."

"What are we betting for?"

"Well, if I win, I'll already have a million dollars, so I won't need you to give me anything."

"And what if I win, and you don't have a million dollars?"

"You'll get to tell me I was wrong." Angela held the pencil out. Edie laughed, but Angela caught sight of something anxious, a hint of rivalry that flickered in Edie's eyes. Edie grabbed the pencil from Angela and signed her name. Angela put the piece of paper on top of the pile of ads and tucked the bundle of pages in between the books on the shelf.

Angela wondered where that piece of paper was now. As she drove back into the city her thoughts shifted from Edie to Logan. She wondered what he was doing and if he ever thought about her. Maybe if she was more like Edie, he would have stayed. *But I'm nothing like her*, she

thought bitterly. *That's what he couldn't handle. That's why he left.* Toronto should have been a new beginning. She needed a fresh start, but Toronto was the same. She could feel the bitterness settle onto her face. She took a deep breath and relaxed her forehead. She smoothed the skin with her hand. She couldn't afford the wrinkles.

Angela pulled into her parkade. She stopped in and grabbed the last box from her storage locker in the basement before taking the elevator up to the eighth floor. Her place still smelled like other people, but it was getting better. She had rented her condo out when she left. She hadn't wanted to sell it. She had lived in the building since she graduated university, the closest thing to a home since she moved out of Frank's. Besides, the job in Toronto was only temporary. A chance to take a break from practicing child psychiatry and work with a former colleague on a research project. The focus was on bipolar disorder and genetics and it piqued her interest. She often thought Frank showed symptoms of bipolar. Not that he would ever go to a doctor, never mind a therapist. Angela put the box with the others in the living room. *Now I'm back where I started,* she thought, *and nothing's really changed. Frank won't talk about the truth and Edie still runs away.*

She took off her clothes and slipped on her robe. She hated wearing clothes. Clothes let her forget about her body, about the parts she hated, the parts she wanted gone. Clothes made her forget not to eat. She poured a glass from the box of wine in the fridge and walked out onto the balcony. Clouds stretched wispy grey across the sky. Twilight was frowning its brow and the sky stared into her with darkened eyes. She remembered not being alone. She remembered the shelter his body once gave on evenings like this one. She replayed the breakup with Logan in her head over and over again.

“What exactly can’t you handle, Logan? That I’m independent? That I can pay by own bills?”

“I can’t watch you doing this to yourself. I won’t. You need to come to terms with this—I don’t know how to fix this and I can’t stand here and see you wither away—starving yourself to death.”

Why didn’t the good ones stay? Men like her boss Michael, and whoever it was she was with last Tuesday, were just fillers, just parts of people she collected to temporarily fill the void before eventually they fell through it. They weren’t actually good. They weren’t whole.

Angela turned away from the night sky and surrendered herself to bed. She tried closing her eyes, but it didn’t stop her thinking. She sat up and swallowed a pill from one of the bottles on her nightstand. She laid back down and stared at the ceiling until the whiteness consumed the whole room.

Angela was fourteen. The police car pulled into the driveway. From the back seat she could see that the house was dark. She hoped Frank wasn’t home or if he was, that he was passed out for the night. The officer left her in the car while he went to the front door. Edie answered. She looked at the cop and then at the car and then went back into the house. Frank appeared in the doorway. Angela watched him lean against the door frame to listen to what the officer had to tell him. *Thank God I ran out of paint*, she thought. *Thank God I got rid of the cans before they saw me. I hope Kyle’s gonna be okay, God, I hope he’s okay*, she thought. She kept her eyes on what was going on at the front door. She saw Frank take a deep breath and rub the back of his

neck. It was only once that he turned from the officer to look at her in the back of the car. She couldn't read him. She couldn't make any predictions.

When she was allowed inside, Frank pointed her into the living room, and she went and sat on the edge of the couch. She saw Edie looking at her from the edge of the hall. She looked away and pulled the sleeves of her hoodie over her hands to hide that paint stained her fingertips.

"I thought I made it clear that you're not allowed hanging around with that delinquent anymore."

"It was by accident, he showed up at the park—"

"And now you get dragged home by the cops for spray painting the neighbourhood? For vandalizing?" Franks voice was getting louder. The control began to slip from his voice.

"I wasn't the one painting, I was just there—"

"Don't you dare lie to me." He stepped towards her, grabbed her hand through her hoodie and pulled back the sleeve. She could feel his anger towering above her. "Don't you dare—"

"Dad!" Edie cut in from the edge of the room. Frank stepped back, letting Angela's hand drop. "She said she didn't do it."

"You stay out of this—you think I'm stupid, that I don't know you're both little liars?" He turned back to Angela. "That boy is bad and he's gonna drag you down with him."

"I don't hang out with him anymore!"

"The cops just caught you with him."

"I wasn't with him—"

"Do you think I'm stupid? Did you think I wouldn't find out? I can almost smell that little jerk on you. I asked your sister. She told me she's seen you with him." Angela's head

snapped towards the hall, but Edie wouldn't meet her glare. "He's turned you into a little lying whore."

"You don't know him. He's not like that."

"I don't need to know him. He shows up and suddenly you're skipping classes. You were just caught shoplifting last week, and you were lucky they didn't press charges, and now this. What's wrong with you? Next time the cops bring you home, this won't be your home anymore. They can take you to juvey and you can see if you like it there."

"Like that would be any different than living here—this house *is* a prison. No wonder mom left." As soon as she said it, she knew she crossed a line. She anticipated the slap, but it didn't come. Frank took a step back. All she could see was hate. It burned in his eyes until it overflowed into a grimace that clouded the rest of his face. Angela wanted to get away from him, away from that face with all its hate. She stood up to walk out but Frank caught her by the arm, just below the shoulder, making her flinch, and sat her back down on the couch.

"I'm not done talking yet." Angela didn't speak. She didn't look up. She could hear him take a deep breath. An attempt to regain composure, control. His words were stiff and cold. "If I ever hear that you've been hanging around with that boy again, I'll break his face. You understand me?"

Angela nodded.

"Yes. Dad."

"Yes, Dad." She repeated.

Angela held her glass to her lips and watched Edie stub her toe on a chair as she made her way across the lounge and out the door. Angela hadn't expected Edie's call and she didn't understand her sudden desire to come see her, but she had an idea of what it was about now. Edie was scared. Scared her perfect world would be blown apart. She had conveniently forgotten all the abuse, all the hateful words and acts that drove their lives growing up apart and painted a picture of a life without any shadows, but Angela wanted answers. She wanted to find out the truth about their mom, why she left, why she left them there with him. Maybe Edie thought once the truth came out, her own secrets would surface too, and there were pieces of truth Edie never wanted found. *That was the problem, Angela thought, every time shit got hard, or conversations got tense, or conflicts came to the surface, Edie just walked away. She just turned her back and walked away from it. But closing your eyes doesn't make the dirt disappear.* She finished her glass and looked at her phone sitting on the table. It was just after ten. *Edie was such a lightweight.* Angela scrolled through her old texts. The ones she didn't want to delete. She tried taking another sip, but her glass was empty. She looked over at the bar. Edie was right, the bartender was young. Probably too young. Besides, she was thinking of someone else. A pang in her stomach demanded her attention. Frank's voice popped into her head.

"Two's probably enough, eh, if you want to keep fitting into that dress you just bought." Angela remembered staring at her dad from across the table and dropping the slice of pizza back into the box. He didn't even look up from the book he was reading. "I don't know why you had to spend so much on a dress anyway. Why couldn't you just wear the same dress Edie wore to her grad?"

"Because I don't fit into it." She had said.

"Another reason to cap it at two."

Angela shook the memory out of her head. Even after all these years, she couldn't get away from it. She felt her stomach clamp again. She pulled out the bottle of Adderall and ordered another drink.

Angela stared at the picture in the frame she had just unpacked. It was her and Edith when they were small. Ange remembered when the picture was taken. Edith had been crying because Frank was forcing her to wear her hair in a bun for the picture and she didn't want to. Angela looked at the picture closer. Edie's eyes were red rimmed and glossy, but she still managed to put a smile on her face. Angela wasn't smiling. The girl in the picture stared out blankly. Angela thought about her visit with Edie a few nights earlier. Edie hadn't really changed at all. She still put on a face and ignored everything else around her. The world could be crumbling, and she would just keep staring straight ahead, pretending not to notice.

Angela tossed the frame on the couch, took a long drag of her vape and let the smoke out slowly. She surveyed the boxes that were left. A song by *System of a Down* started playing. She turned up the music on her speaker and continued unpacking. It wasn't long before she heard the knock on the door. Angela meandered around the boxes. She half suspected who it was and when she answered, she opened the door wide. She let the satin robe slip down her shoulder revealing the midnight blue sheer bra she had on underneath. "Oh, take that serious look off your face, Dean, you know the only reason you knock on my door instead of ratting on me to the super is 'cause you know I'm never dressed when I'm home."

"Angela—"

“You feel like dancing, Dean? There’s only underwear dancing allowed in here. So, you’ll need to undress, and then maybe I’ll think of letting you in.”

“Just turn down the music, Angela.”

She stuck her tongue out at him as he walked away and closed the door. She made her way back through the boxes to her desk in the living room. She turned the volume down on the speaker and then shut it off completely. *If you can’t feel the music in your chest, it’s just noise.* A letter lay open next to the speaker on the desk. She picked it up and read it over again. The paper had yellowed, and it had begun to wear at the creases. She ran her index finger over the words at the bottom, *Love Tommy*. She had found the letter tucked into the pages of an art book of paintings by Johannes Vermeer. She had taken the book from Frank before moving out of their old house to go to university. She liked the painting printed on the cover. Edith had said they looked the same; Angela and the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

The letter was addressed to Frank. It wasn’t really a love letter, but Ange thought she recognized tenderness, and maybe even a sliver of optimism, threaded through the despondence. The letter was sent from a psychiatric assessment facility. Frank never spoke about Tommy. He never said she’d spent time in a facility and Angela had been too young to remember much. This was the only window into her mother Angela had. She never told Frank she found it. She never told anyone. It was something of her mother that was only hers. It was the reason she decided to focus on psychiatry after her first year of university. At this point she knew most of the letter by heart. *I want to feel a spark—that thrill of excitement. I would give anything to feel that again—that electricity when my hand brushes by yours—when all those anticipations, all those desires seem to instantly transfer, connect, reveal themselves. I want to feel that again—the unbearable heartache of being in love. Is that petty? To desire emotion—not just emotion—earth shattering*

emotion.... I want to love you Frank, but right now I am still numb. I feel nothing and it is all meaningless. Even the nothing is meaningless. There is still a heaviness to the air that makes each breath a chore.... They say the meds take time. Please be patient. Please, let me have some time...

She put the letter down and picked up her phone. She wanted to see if Edie had gone to see Frank yet to look through his stuff. If he had kept this letter, there must be more. Angela texted Edie.

Hey, did you get a chance to go see Frank this weekend?

Angela only had to wait a few minutes for the reply.

Not yet. I'm going to help him pick up some supplies next week.

Will you look around his place when you're there?

I guess I can try.

It's important. Please.

Okay.

Look for anything like a photo album, or a book that mom used to read, maybe there are some letters.

Sure.

Don't get your hopes up.

I don't need to hope. I know there's something there.

Edie didn't reply. Angela started typing and then erased it. She stared at the screen, her finger hovering over the letters, deciding. She took a deep breath and tossed the phone onto the couch. She couldn't risk Edith changing her mind or shutting down. Angela sighed and surveyed the room. She didn't feel like unpacking anymore. Most of it was done anyway. She poured more brandy into the oversized snifter glass and walked over to the balcony. She leaned her elbows on the railing, holding the glass out above the street below. The leaves on the trees that lined the sidewalk were not quite fully grown and she could see people walking, small like ants, below. She wondered if any of them ever looked up, if anyone ever saw her there and wondered who she was. She wondered if she haunted anyone's thoughts, or if they thought of her at all. Did they see her watching them and wonder if she was lonely or just alone? Angela felt like she had been alone her whole life. *Even when they say they won't go, everyone ends up leaving, even my own sister.* Angela thought back to when Edie first moved out of the house. Angela was fifteen.

"You said you'd wait for me. You said we would leave together. Live together."

"I know and when you turn eighteen you can come stay with me. I just can't stay here anymore, Ange. I can't take it."

"And I can? I won't turn eighteen for almost three years."

"And when you do, we can live together."

"When are you leaving?"

"Charlotte's mom co-signed for the apartment July first. It's a done deal. It's not even that much more than Dad said he would charge me after I graduate."

“I can’t believe you would do this. I can’t believe you would just leave me here.”

“Don’t say it like that. I’m not abandoning you. You can come visit whenever you want.”

“Did you tell Dad yet?”

“No. And don’t say anything.”

“Why shouldn’t I? Doesn’t he have a right to know? You had no problem telling him about Kyle.”

“Don’t you dare, Angela. I swear—”

“I thought you had my back, Edie, but all you think about is yourself. You are so selfish. You are such a traitor.” Angela twisted a large oval ring off her hand and threw across the room. “You can have your damn mood ring back. And it worked just fine when I wore it. Maybe it always stays black when you wear it cause you’re such a bitch.” Angela stormed off and out of the house. She walked to the park down the street and sat near the edge of the pond. She picked up a stone and threw it in, watching the concentric circles expand out across the surface. She wanted to run away but knew she couldn’t. She sat there and waited for someone to come find her. The sun went down, and soon after, the wind blew a cool breeze across the water. She started to get nervous. Maybe they were looking for her, maybe they were upset or worried. She gave up waiting and walked home. She walked in the door ready with explanations, but she didn’t need them. Edie didn’t look up from the book she was reading, and Frank was asleep in his chair, a half dozen empty cans of beer beside him. She went to her room and lay down on her bed. She pulled her blanket up under her nose and inhaled the smell of lavender. *If Mom was here, she would have come looking. She would have cared.* She stared at the wall, still waiting to be found, and fell asleep.

“He doesn’t need me to come until next week now, the supplies he needed weren’t ready.”

“Are you serious? Did you tell him you wanted to look through old stuff— maybe that’s why he is delaying?”

“That’s crazy and you sound paranoid. There is no big conspiracy. I don’t get it, Angela, why are you so bent on finding her. Mom left us. Period.”

“Because she was forced to leave.”

“Why do you believe that?”

“Because look how we grew up, look how abusive he was, we were always scared of getting hit or being yelled at. We were always aware of the mood he was in, and we were constantly scared of upsetting him.”

“He was doing the best he could on his own. Don’t you think it would have been hard raising us alone? I don’t know about you, but I wasn’t exactly a good kid. I got into a lot of trouble and so did you. Whatever he did back then—that’s how everyone lived. Everyone has a story about a wooden spoon.”

“First, that’s not true and, second, that doesn’t make it right.”

“No, it doesn’t, but that was a long time ago and he’s changed. He doesn’t lose his temper so quickly anymore, not since Jacob was born, and he’s not as mean as he used to be.”

“Mean? Are you serious—verbally abusive are the words you are not wanting to say.”

“Those are strong words—”

“And just because a volcano hasn’t erupted in decades, doesn’t mean it won’t erupt again and doesn’t somehow erase all the damage it has done in the past. The landscape is still scarred. The people are still dead.”

“Jesus, Angela, did you come across an article on volcanos recently? Nobody died.”

“Well, fucking hurrah, Edith! Parent of the year goes to Frank Gallo—he was just trying his best, folks.”

“Okay. Fine. I get it.”

“And here’s the shut down, right on cue.” *Shit, shit, shit.* Angela held her breath, waiting, the silence sharpening her words.

“I’m not shutting down. If Tommy was forced to leave, why didn’t she ever try to see us? She knew what school we went to. She could have found us there or looked for us at the park by our house. We’re all grown up now, Angela. So why hasn’t she come back, why hasn’t she looked us up? Because it wasn’t Frank, it wasn’t anything. She just didn’t want to live that life anymore. Maybe she just wanted something more.”

Angela didn’t say anything for a while. She could hear Edie’s breathing on the other end of the line. “You don’t *know* that. I just want to know for sure. When are you going over there?”

“To Frank’s? In a week, next Wednesday.”

“Will you still look through the old stuff for me?”

“I said I would.”

“Don’t tell him I want you to look for Mom’s stuff. Just say you’re looking for your old yearbook or something. Please.”

“Okay.”

Angela threw her phone onto the bed and reached over to scratch the back of her shoulder, and then the back of her arm. Everything seemed to be itchy. She rolled her shoulders to try to get rid of the itch. When that didn’t work, she paced back and forth across her bedroom. She had to move around but the room was too small. She needed to leave or she’d start crawling

up the walls. Maybe a walk would help. *Do I have time?* She looked at the clock. *No.* She needed to focus. She had to go to work. She had to be able to sit still and focus. *I just have to fucking focus.* She walked into the kitchen, then into the bedroom, then back to the kitchen. She grabbed the scissors from the knife block and held them open with one hand. She stared at them, hesitating. She knew she was close to hyperventilating. The quickness of her breath shook her whole body. She put the scissors on the counter and went back into her room. She looked through the pill bottles on the side of the bed, knocking half of them onto the floor. She finally found what she wanted. She put the lorazepam into her mouth and quickly chewed it, chasing it down with water before the taste made her gag. She sat on the edge of the bed and slowed her breathing. She closed her eyes and counted to ten and then counted to ten again. She felt her pulse slow. She lay down on the bed and waited for the wave. It started in her gums and moved down her neck and over her shoulders. She felt it travel down her arms until it hit the ends of her fingertips. She opened her eyes and turned her head. She looked at one arm and then looked at the other. *Time for another tattoo.* Angela thought back to her first tattoo.

“Some of these scars are too fresh. You have to wait till they heal if you want me to tattoo you there.”

“How long? Most of them are old.”

“Maybe, but some are pretty fresh. You sure you want ink here? You’ll wreck the tattoo if you cut it.”

“I’m sure. I don’t cut anymore. If it’s there I won’t cut it. How long?”

“I would say come back in six months, minimum. They look like they were pretty clean cuts, but I won’t cover them now.”

Angela pulled her sleeve back down.

“Well, I’m here now, what about a four-leaf clover here.” Angela pointed to the space between her breasts. “I need all the luck I can get.”

“Sure. Give me a minute to draw it up and we’ll get started.”

An hour later, Angela stood evaluating the clover in the mirror. “I love it. It’s perfect.”

Six months after that, a large black and grey peony wrapped around her upper arm, just below her shoulder.

Angela stared out the window and thought about the patient that just left her office. She was just a young little thing. Brooklyn. She needed, so desperately, someone to value her, to make her feel needed, to give her purpose. She felt no worth on her own, it could only come from someone else. Angela met a different ‘Brooklyn’ almost every second day. It was tragic. It was claustrophobic. It was becoming too close. Today Brooklyn had broken down. When Angela heard her sob, she looked up from the pad of paper she was writing notes on. The girl’s face was contorted, ugly in its self-pity. Brooklyn stared straight into Angela’s eyes. “What’s wrong with me?” She begged of Angela, with terrified eyes. Pathetic tears were tracing down her face. Angela had to look away. *What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with me?* The question repeated over and over in her head. The same question she remembered asking Edie after Logan left. The girl’s question revealed the wretchedness of it all. The ugliness of it all. It made Angela despise herself, loath herself, she felt disgusted with it all. She looked back at Brooklyn and remembered

she couldn't be here. It wasn't her time. She swallowed hard and erased all of herself from the room and continued on. Now that the appointment was over, it was only her there. She stared out the window, the bitter taste of self-loathing still in her mouth. She had wanted Logan to love her so much. She had needed him to. She needed his strength, his goodness, his wholesomeness. She needed him to make her better, to give her everything Frank never gave and everything Edie had somehow found, everything Edie took for granted. Edie never had to work for anything, it all just seemed to always go her way, fall into her lap. *It was always harder for me*, Angela thought. *I always had to fight for everything I got*. She thought back to when she was still in her undergrad.

Angela's heart beat in earthquakes, a million times a breath. Pulsing veins shattered violently against bone. Her stomach heaved into her chest. *What did he say to do?* She tried to think, tried to clear her head. *Put your head between your knees. Take slow, deep breaths. Don't think—no—think of this. I'm fine. It's okay. It only feels like I'm falling. I'm fine. It's okay. It only feels like I'm falling. I'm fine. I'm not falling.*

“Whoa, babe, are you okay?”

Angela lifted her head and saw Casey, leaning against the door frame of her room. Angela covered her face with her hands. “I don't know if I can do this.” Angela felt the bed sink beside her and a hand rest gently on her back.

“Do what? What's got you so stressed?”

“It's this last exam. I have to ace it and this stuff is so damn hard. And this house is always so busy and everyone else is done their term and partying and I just need to concentrate but I just don't know if it will be enough.”

“You'll pass it no problem. You're good at all that psych shit.”

Angela shook her head. "I can't just pass. The only way I can afford grad school is if I get funding. I'm already over my head in student loans and there's no point in even applying for any of these awards if my GPA isn't like a 4.5."

"When's the exam?"

"Two days."

"Well, that's not too bad."

"I just need a drink."

"No, no drinking yet, doesn't go great with studying." Casey pushed the hair that had fallen in front of Angela's face and tucked it behind her ear. Angela looked at her. Casey's eyes never seemed to worry. They were always steady, warm. She had an openness about her that was always genuine, always honest. Angela leaned her head on Casey's shoulder. She felt Casey lean back.

"Maybe my dad was right. I'm not smart enough for this. He always said I didn't have a head for books. 'You're so good at being dramatic, be an actress,' he said."

"Your dad's a jerk. Look how far you've come. Don't think about that."

"Maybe just one drink. So I can focus."

"No. It'll be okay. Hold on a sec and I'll grab you something from my room. I'll be right back."

Angela laid back on the bed and waited. A minute later a bottle of pills landed on her stomach.

"Those will help you focus."

Angela picked up the bottle. "Concerta? What's that?"

“Same thing as Adderall or Ritalin. Listen, Angie, you’re going to rock this exam. You’re going to make it through grad school and you’re gonna have it made.”

“Thanks.”

“Now pop one of those, start studying, and I’ll go tell those bitches downstairs to keep it down.”

The phone on her desk beeped, bringing Angela back to the present. Her next appointment was here. She turned away from the window and went to her desk. She pulled a bottle from out of the top drawer and chased the pills with water. She picked up her phone and pressed 9. “I’m ready. Send her in.”

It was all just noise, everywhere. Inside and out. She couldn’t tell who was screaming anymore. She couldn’t tell who was crying. Was she crying? Angela touched her cheek but there were no tears. She looked down at the phone in her hand and then she looked around. She was at the office sitting at her desk. She looked at the desk in front of her. A can of diet Pepsi, a container with fifteen snap peas, six pieces of cantaloupe and six strawberries, a zipper bag with eight whole almonds. *Right*, she was about to have lunch but then Edie called. Today was the day Edie was helping Frank with supplies. The day she was going to look for anything Mom might have left behind. It was Edie’s voice screaming out from the phone in her hand. She lifted the phone to her ear. Edie was still blethering on the other end. Angela couldn’t understand what she was saying. She set the phone down on the desk. She opened the bag of almonds. She took one and put it into her mouth. She looked out the window. The sky was blue. She made sure to chew

the nut until it was a pulp. Usually, it took about ten chews. When she tried to swallow, her throat didn't oblige. She took a Kleenex and spit out the almond paste. She folded the tissue into a small square, took her keys from the desk drawer, and left her office. She walked to reception and dropped the tissue into the garbage can beside the assistant's desk.

"Cancel my appointments. There's a family emergency." Angela didn't wait for a response. She just walked straight out the door.

Angela stood on the corner across the street looking up at the three-story Nutty Club building. An unlit cigarette dangled between her fingers. A firetruck, a police car, and an ambulance were parked in front, blocking part of the street. The red and white flashing lights animated the giant peppermint striped *CAN • D • MAN* painted on the brick wall. Angela didn't move. She didn't cross the street. Firemen came out first, then paramedics with a stretcher. She felt the cigarette tremble against her thigh. The ambulance left. Then the firefighters. Another cop car pulled up and officers were coming and going from the building. She knew she should cross the street. She knew she should go see Edie. She knew she would eventually go. It was inevitable. But her legs didn't move. She tried to imagine the scene, tried to picture how she would enter the building, how she would walk up the stairs, how she would react when she saw Edith, but no feeling came. It all seemed unnatural. It all seemed made up. Contrived. Forced. The stoplight changed and the crosswalk chirped. Angela stared at the bright white outline of the walking person signal. She took a breath and stepped off the curb to cross the street.

“Can you believe it? There wasn’t even anything there! He hadn’t kept a damn thing and he had the audacity to just die with all his secrets, without giving any explanation. He just left us with nothing—No, no—not nothing, worse than nothing. He left us with a slap to the face, a punch to the stomach. Well, fuck that!” Angela leaned close, trying to shout over the music to the man sitting next to her at the bar. The man looked at the bartender then back at Angela.

“Good luck with all that, really.” The man looked one more time at the bartender and then got up from his seat. The bartender leaned over and put a glass of water in front of Angela.

“Listen, honey. I’m gonna call you a cab.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Angela put her elbow up on the bar and plunked her head clumsily on her fist. “Let me know when it’s here.”

Angela blinked until the darkness dissolved into flashing yellow sparks. She waited until the sparks receded before getting up out of the tub. She moved slowly, trying to prevent her brain from ricocheting against her skull. She braced herself on the counter and gently touched her head where the back of her skull had hit the edge of the tub. She could feel a bump, but it didn’t leave blood on her fingers. She shivered and realized she was naked and still soaking wet. She wrapped herself with a towel and made her way to the bedroom, using the wall to keep her balance. She lay down on her bed. The room was spinning but she didn’t know if that was the fall or the alcohol. She needed her phone. She had to call someone. She looked around her room but couldn’t see the phone anywhere. She didn’t want to move but she knew she had to. She made her way to the living room, sliding her shoulder against the wall when she could. She saw

her phone on the coffee table. She lowered herself, slowly, onto the couch. If she leaned over, she would lose her balance. She didn't want to dial his number, she sat staring at the phone in her hand. She still had his number labeled *Babyface*. She forgot for a second what she was doing. When she remembered, she knew it could only be him.

She put the phone on speaker and leaned her head on the back of the couch as she waited till his answering machine kicked in, ...*you know what to do, leave a message*. "Damn it—oh right—" she cleared her throat, the pain in her head exploded, "Hi. Logan. It's me, I need some help..." As she spoke the phone started vibrating in her hand and his name popped up on the screen. He was calling her back. She pushed the talk button.

"Hi."

"Angela?" his voice sounded groggy.

"Yeah, I'm sorry for calling, I don't even know what time it is."

"Are you drunk?"

Her laugh changed to a wince when the stabbing in her head reminded her why she was calling. "It doesn't matter. I think I need to go to the hospital. I hit my head pretty hard. I don't think I'm bleeding but it's hard to stand up and my head—Jesus Christ, my head...I just want to sleep but I don't think you're supposed to do that if you have a concussion and I'm not sure that I have one but I just--"

"Just sit tight. I'll be right there."

The phone beeped off in her hand.

Angela was still on the couch when Logan walked in. She tried to lift her head, but the explosion of pain stopped her. She heard him mumble something under his breath.

“You’re naked.” He grabbed a blanket from another chair and swapped it out for the damp towel she still had draped over her.

“I fell in the tub. It’s the back of my head.” She lifted her head slowly, turning so he could see. His hand was warm against her damp hair.

“It doesn’t look like there’s a cut. You need to get dressed.”

“No, just put me to bed, I think I can just sleep it off.”

“I’ll help you up, come on.” Logan pushed the coffee table out of the way and hooked his arms under hers and lifted her slowly, keeping the blanket between them. The top of her head came to just under his chin. He helped her to the bedroom and sat her on the edge of the bed and then looked through some of her drawers for clothes. When he turned back, she was lying down on her side, holding the blanket to her chest. He could see each of the ribs in her back.

“It’s nothing you haven’t seen before,” she mumbled without looking at him.

“The scarab on your shoulder’s new.”

“I wish I could feel like that again.”

“Like what?”

“The dopamine rush, I wish I didn’t have to...”

“Didn’t have to what?”

“It just seems like it’s the only time I feel...” She didn’t finish her thought. He stood, wading in the silence that was slowly swallowing the room. She turned over and looked at him.

“I think you should go.”

“I can’t do that. I think you’re fading here. Have you been eating?”

“I’m working on my heroine chic look,” she said provocatively. “Can you see it yet?”

She rolled back over.

He shook her leg gently. “Hey.” His voice was soft but stern. “Don’t do this. Here, put these on.”

“I don’t want to,” she mumbled into the blanket. “I just panicked. I don’t think it was that bad.” She rolled over to look at him, trying not to wince. “I’m sorry I made you come.”

“If you can get up and walk across the room, I’ll go.”

“Jesus, Logan. I’m fine.”

“Show me then.”

She held up her arm and he helped her sit up. She took the clothes he had tossed on the bed. “I need underwear. Top drawer of the small dresser.”

“Please,” he added, opening the drawer.

“Please.” She slowly stood up. She stared at the black panties in his hand and then at him. His eyes were fiercely clear. She resented their steadiness. *His* steadiness. Her shoulders dropped. She gave in. “I don’t think I can bend...”

“It’s okay.” He bent down, holding her underwear open, like you would for a child. She stepped into them slowly, her hands on his shoulders. Then he helped her with her pants and her shirt. She sat on the edge of the bed, feeling infantile. He stood, leaning in the doorway. “I think it’s best if we get your head checked out.”

“Why don’t we just wait until the morning.”

“No, you’re too dizzy.”

She didn’t argue. She let him take her.

“Why do they have to keep it so bright in here.” She knew she was whining but she didn’t care. Logan flicked off one of the switches near the door of the room. She took her hand away from her eyes. He was standing, leaning against the wall, watching her. He looked tired. “You don’t have to stay. It might take a while.”

“You’ll need a ride home.”

“I’ll take a cab. You’ve done enough and it’s late—or early? You should go home and sleep.”

“I don’t mind. I don’t think I could sleep now anyway.”

“Well, at least sit down then, you’re making me nervous.” She pointed to a chair. He smiled at her, but only with his mouth. His eyes were sad. Maybe they were just tired. He sat next to the bed. She could hear the thoughts he wasn’t speaking. “Well, just say it, then.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like someone took an axe to the back of my head, but that’s not what I meant.”

“I know.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” she sighed. “I can see it. You think I’m reckless but that’s not what it was. It was just a stupid accident.”

“I don’t need an explanation and I won’t do this anymore.”

“Do what?” She could taste the bitterness in her voice, and it made her cringe, but she couldn’t contain it. “Scold me? Try to make me into the person you really want?”

“Stop.” His voice was stern. “You called. I came. I care about you, but I’m not getting on this rollercoaster again. I won’t.” His words laid her bare. She closed her eyes to prevent him from seeing her, but truth leaks out at the seams. The pain in her head felt like it was getting

worse. She opened her eyes hoping it would make the room stop spinning but it didn't. She started to sit up.

"I'm gonna throw up," she said, pointing to the garbage can in the corner. He grabbed it before her stomach could hit the floor.

"I'm going to find the doctor," he said when she was done heaving into the bin. He handed her a paper cup with water. "Will you be alright for a minute?"

She nodded and lay back down.

Angela leaned her head against the window as Logan drove. The glass was cool against her clammy skin. The doctor's voice repeated in her head. The questions slid from his lips and in through the seams of her skin, dilating beneath, like wine spilled on carpet. The pressure made her flush. *Do you live alone? Is there someone who could stay with you? Is there someone who could check in every couple of hours? Were you drunk? How much did you drink? Yes, it's important. The alcohol might be cloaking or might be exacerbating the symptoms, we can't tell at this point. Do you live alone? Do you have anybody? Do you have anyone?* Logan interrupted her thoughts. "At least we're beating morning rush hour." She didn't reply but noticed the sky was starting to lighten. The snow had finally gone, and everything left behind was covered in sand and dirt and filth.

"Have you ever felt like you were watching yourself fall?" Angela didn't wait for him to reply. "Not literally fall, I mean like lose control, unravel. Crash and burn. Like you could see yourself from outside yourself, and everything is happening in slow motion, and you can't do anything about it. You can only watch. And deep down you know that every single decision you

are making is the wrong one, but you keep making them and you bury all feeling, all sense of guilt, all sense of independence, autonomy, free will and just let it take you, abandon yourself to the whims of *life*. And you watch as *life* carries you out to sea and, at first, you think you're doing fine, keeping your balance in the sandy bottom, until there is a point in time— and if you were to look back, this is the second, the pivot, that would be etched in your memory—the specific moment when you realize you can't touch bottom anymore, and all you can do is try to keep your head above the water as the tide pulls you further and as the shore falls further and further from view and as the current that you're trapped within gathers more speed and more power, until it is too strong, and has too much momentum of its own and you are unable to stop it. You are just trapped inside, along for the ride.

“There was this boy, older than me, I don't even remember his name. I was fifteen, I had met him working at Junior's. He used to come in and drink coffee and smoke. You used to be able to smoke inside back then. He said he lived on his own, in an apartment. He wanted me to come over. I knew if I went, it would probably mean sex. I was a virgin. I didn't know if I wanted to, but I knew going would imply I did. If I did go, I would have had to sneak out of the house. If I got caught, I had an idea of what dad would have done. If I left, it would have to be forever, to run away, but I didn't know him well and it was a shit part of town. Something didn't feel right about it, about him, but he was so insistent, so persuasive, and what if it was me that was wrong. I remember a dream I had about him—that's not exactly true, I remember the tones, the colours, everything was grey and shades of blue and the room felt hard in the cold light. Maybe I'm making it up.

“The night I was supposed to meet him, I was at home and we were eating dinner, I can't remember exactly why or how it came out but dad found out that Edith had been taking handfuls

of his Zoloft prescription. I remember sitting at the kitchen table and watching it unfold, like some TV show that had nothing to do with me. Dad was furious, they were both screaming and yelling and then it just stopped. He had asked her if she wanted to hurt herself and she told him she didn't know. The anger broke. He broke. I slipped through the cracks. There was no more yelling. The crisis unit came and took her away. She ended up in the psych ward under observation for a couple weeks. I never made it out of the house to meet that boy and I never saw him again. I never went back to my job at the restaurant either. I didn't regret it. The sad part is that I was glad it happened. I was glad the universe had made the decision for me. I was weak and feeble then, too."

Logan didn't say anything. She couldn't tell if it was because he didn't know what to say or because he did.

She watched the buildings pass by in silence for the rest of the drive. Logan parked in front of her building. She started to move and then stopped. "Frank's dead. Edith found him. Don't say anything. I just wanted to tell you. I don't want to talk about it." She closed her eyes, even breathing seemed to take up too much energy. "Can you help me in, I can't seem to feel anything below my neck, I think the percs have kicked in."

He got her into her place and in bed. Before he left the room she murmured, "Maybe you should call Edie."

When Angela opened her eyes, she saw a plate with a piece of rye toast and a cup of coffee on the night table. She heard a voice in the next room. She lifted her head slowly and felt

her brain shift in her skull like a muted bell, the pain wasn't as bad as she anticipated. She slid herself up on some pillows and stared at the doorway. His voice was lighter, softer than it had been. She knew who he was talking to. She remembered his eyes when he looked at her. Both their eyes.

The toast was cold, but the coffee was still warm. She dipped the bread into her coffee and took a bite. It reminded her of when she was young and would dip her toast into chocolate milk. She would only do it when nobody was around. *Eating like that will make you fat.* The butter left an oily shimmer floating in her cup. She set the toast and cup back down. She wanted him to get off the phone. She wanted him to stop talking, she wanted to stop remembering. She leaned back and strained to listen.

His tone sounded concerned but she knew it wasn't concern for her. She was just the closest thing. That's what she had screamed at him the last time they were together. She recognized the taste of venom in her mouth. She pushed the plate of toast off the nightstand. The plate landed on the hardwood and split into two, the noise echoed and stopped the voice in the other room.

"Sorry," she whispered when she saw him in the doorway.

"I'll get it, stay there so you don't cut your feet." He left the doorway and came back with the broom. She watched him sweep the pieces into the dustpan.

"I think I'll be good now. You don't have to stay and keep an eye on me."

"I was just on the phone with your sister. She's coming to see you."

"You shouldn't have called her."

"You asked me to."

"You shouldn't have listened."

Logan stopped sweeping and looked up at her. She turned her face away. She didn't want to look at his eyes.

"I have to go feed Pete." He left the room. She heard him empty the dustpan into the garbage and put the broom back into the closet. He came back and stood against the doorway.

"Did you need anything before I go?"

"No," she whispered. After a moment she added "thank you."

"I'll check in a little later."

"You didn't have to come."

"I wanted to make sure you were okay, plus I figured we needed to talk about what we are going to do with dad and everything. We can't put it off any longer."

"Bury him," Angela grumbled, propping a second pillow under her head.

"That's not what I mean." Edie let out a breath and looked up at the ceiling. *It was* smooth, she thought. "You don't bury ashes anyway. We need to do something, organize some sort of a—what do you call them—whatever—there needs to be closure."

"Like a wake? For who?"

"Everyone."

"Who's everyone?"

"Just everyone," Edie snapped.

"There's only us."

"Wasn't there a second cousin?"

“Are you serious?” Angela’s voice was on edge. “I guess you better include the clerk from the Art Loft too. God knows dad threw away enough money there. Oh, and maybe the guy that works the ten to six shift at the LC.”

“Fine, then it will just be us. Me, You, Adrien, and Jacob.”

“What about Mom?”

“What about her?”

“Whatever.” Angela groaned and rolled onto her side. “Let me know when it is,” she added over her shoulder.

Edie stayed standing in the doorway staring at her sister’s back. She remembered how, when they were little, Angela’s hair reached almost to her bum. Edie would sit behind her on their bed and brush it. It would take so long to get all the knots out and Angela would yell that she was pulling too hard. Edie counted the strokes sometimes. She remembered once she got up to a hundred and fifty. Then Edie would part Angela’s hair down the middle and French braid each side from her temples all the way down to the very ends. One time when Angela lost her elastics, Edie used twist ties. Edie thought about the day she walked in on Angela in the bathroom. She was standing in front of the mirror with scissors in her hand. The summer sun had grown sly and cast sunbeams across the bathroom wall. She watched Angela’s tears fall without echo, like the softly falling locks of hair that cascaded through sunbeam reflections that bounced off the stainless-steel scissors and distracted from the violence of it all. She didn’t know why Ange had done it. She’d never asked. She just turned and walked out, shutting the bathroom door behind her.

Angela kept her hair short from then on. Edie felt herself soften. She gave in and sat on the corner of the bed, facing the door.

“How did you hit your head?”

“Logan didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“I slipped in the tub.”

“What are you—like ninety?” Edie felt a pillow hit her back. She looked over her shoulder, but Angela’s back was still facing her. There was a group of orange pill bottles sitting on the side table.

“They gave you opioids for a concussion? Is that normal?”

“They didn’t give me all of those. It’s fine, I told them the regular stuff doesn’t do anything for me. They just gave weak ones, anyway. That reminds me though, pass me one of those Percocet, I’m due for another.”

Edie looked over the labels. The names seemed familiar, but she didn’t know what they were all for. “Here,” she said, putting the pill in Angela’s waiting hand. “I’ll just refill your water.”

Edie stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. She smiled and then let it drop. Smiled and let it drop. She watched the creases fold and unfold around her eyes. The reflection brought back a dream.

In the dream she was at home, looking out the back window. The back yard was the same as her real one but instead of one maple tree there was a long row of trees, all planted along a long wooden fence. Some of the trees were cut halfway up the trunk, but the top half was still attached, only they kind of hung there, like arms trying to touch toes. There was a woman who kept leaping up and leaning over the fence with a chainsaw and cutting down all the trees. She

would do it quick, in one fell swoop, and she would look at Edie in the window as she was doing it, and her face was strange. It was all contorted and wide-eyed, but there was something about it, something recognizable, something familiar. Edie yelled at her, but she wouldn't stop. She would just disappear behind the fence and then pop up further down and stare at Edie and chop down another tree.

Edie looked away from the mirror and saw the glass overflowing. "I found something at Dad's," she called from the bathroom.

Edie walked back into the bedroom. Angela was sitting up in bed with her legs crossed in front of her. Edie grabbed her bag and sat across from Angela on the bed. She pulled out a bundle of letters and set them down between them. Angela looked at the letters and then at Edie, waiting for her to say something but she didn't.

"When did you find these?"

"Recently."

"Did you read them already?"

"No," Edie lied. "I thought we should look at them together."

"I would have looked at them."

"I know." Edie pushed them towards Angela. "Well, read them." Angela took the elastic off the stack and tossed an envelope to Edie. Neither spoke. They just passed the letters back and forth.

Eddie could feel the room change. She could sense the seed of betrayal metastasize in her sister. She watched as it consumed her whole being, and then continued hungrily, to overflow and infect every corner of the room, electric and nauseous.

“She wanted to leave,” Eddie said softly. “It’s clear it was her decision.”

“Was it? Who put it in her head that if she stayed, she’d harm us, contaminate—infect us?”

“Where does she say that it was Dad?”

“Right here.” Angela turned the letter she was holding around and pointed to the end of the page. She turned it back, “She writes, *I could never let my own emotions, all my anger, all my sadness, impact the girls. I know that worried you most. They are better off without me in their life. But maybe when I’m better, I will feel deserving of their love.*’ He made her feel like a monster.”

“You’re reading into that too much. Of course he would be worried about how she was acting around us, that doesn’t mean that he made her feel bad about it, or told her it would be better if she left. Lots of people have issues, Christ Angela, you should know.”

“But maybe that’s how she took it. She *was* trying to get better. She had already sought help before this, before she left for good.”

“What do you mean?”

“I found a letter she wrote. A few years before she left. I found it in between the pages of one of dad’s books, the one on Vermeer I took from him. I think it’s in the pocket of my robe in the living room. I was too young, but maybe you remember something.” Angela didn’t look up. She didn’t feel like fighting about why she never told Eddie about it. She felt Eddie leave the bed and go get it. After a few minutes she came back and sat back on the bed across from Angela.

“I don’t think I remember her ever being away. . . I don’t know, the date on this is ’83, I would have been like five and you wouldn’t have even been a year old.”

“She probably had postpartum.”

“She probably had a lot of things. She didn’t need to abandon her family.”

“She obviously felt like she had to. Even if it was completely her choice—which I don’t think it was—why wouldn’t dad tell us that, why wouldn’t he tell us that she was sick, or depressed or whatever, why wouldn’t he tell us that she was trying to keep in contact? He abandoned her as much as she abandoned us.” Angela’s words hung in the air. Edie didn’t reply. She leafed through the papers, pretending to read them as Angela read through the rest. When Ange was done, she started searching through the letters over again.

“Did he ever even write back to her?” Angela asked.

“It doesn’t seem like it.” Edie tossed a page across the bed. “I guess that’s why she eventually stops sending them.”

“She’s almost begging in some...how could he just—did he ever show you any of these? The ones she sent for us?”

Edie shook her head. “No.” She spoke softly, her voice quickly swallowed by the thickness of the room.

“Dear Edith, I’m not really sure how to start this letter. I’m not sure what your father has told you about me. You were so young when I left, and I thought it best not to hurt you with explanations or goodbyes. Please know I never wanted to leave you, but I could not trust myself as a mother...”

“Enough Ange, I read it.”

“... I only want the best for you and one day maybe we will be able to meet again...”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Edie pulled the page from Angela’s hands and tossed it with the rest. “All this is only one side. As much as you want to believe that Dad was the catalyst for all of this, we don’t know that. I know he made mistakes but at least he stuck by us. At least he tried. How can you take these at face value? We don’t know her, we don’t know where she was, or where she is, and we sure as hell don’t know who she is.”

“Well, I know who Dad is.”

“Do you? Can you? Did you ever once think that he’d do what he did? Did you ever once think he had the capacity to kill himself?”

“Everyone has the capacity. It’s just weather or not they decide to go through with it.”

“Christ, Ange, don’t generalize. I don’t care about everyone else, I care about why he did it.”

“He did it for the same reason everyone else does. You think he was unique? You think any of us are? Like there is some mystical hand guiding each of our paths through this universe? Some meaning for all the pain and all the shit we all have to go through? There isn’t. It’s pointless and it’s fragile and we’re all just trying to find one good reason not to end it and I guess that day, Dad just couldn’t find one.”

“That’s terrible. I wish you’d never said that.”

“That’s life, Edie.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Come on. Are you telling me you’ve never thought about it? Not even in a what-if way, like what if I was dead? What would everyone do, how would they react, what would I even miss out on, would it even make a difference at all? You’ve never had those thoughts?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yeah, I know.”

They looked at each other. Edie didn't say anything more. For the first time she noticed the thin lines beneath Angela's eyes. The skin there looked thin, like tissue paper. She looked down at the letters between them.

“Are you going to keep looking for Mom?”

“Yes. I need more information. I need to know the truth.”

“A version of the truth.”

“Whatever.”

“What if it's not the truth you are expecting?”

“Then at least I'll realize why I'm so fucked up.”

“Enough reading this shit.” Edie pushed all the pages into a pile and moved them off the bed. “Lie down. You should be resting. You look like a sack of shit.”

“I don't know if I can sleep. There's probably something for that on the table there.”

“Never mind that.” Edie found a brush on the dresser. “Move over so I have some room and turn around.” Edie lay down beside her sister on the bed. She used her fingers to first gently pull Angela's hair back from her face. When the big tangles were out she switched to the brush.

“I don't think it's long enough to braid.”

“We'll see what we can do.”

Edie softly pulled the brush through Angela's hair. She heard Ange's breath become shallow and rhythmic. Edie thought her sister had fallen asleep. She stopped brushing and slowly rolled onto her back, so the bed wouldn't shake. She stared at the ceiling. She heard Angela sniff and felt her sister shift beside her.

“Will you stay?” Angela's voice was small.

“Overnight? Yeah, I told Adrien I would be back in the morning before Jake wakes up, to get him ready for school. I think Logan was going to come check in on you tomorrow afternoon.”

Angela murmured in response.

“Edie.”

“Yeah.”

Angela moved her arm behind her in search of Edie’s hand. When she found it, she held on to it. “You can trust me,” she said. Edie inhaled sharply but didn’t say anything. Angela squeezed her sister’s hand. “You need to trust me.”

“I know.” Edie squeezed Angela’s hand back. “I do.”

When Edie got home the next morning the sun hadn’t fully risen yet. She didn’t go straight into the house. She walked around to the back, past the maple tree, and onto the trail that cut through the prairie grass. She held her arm out, feeling the tops of the grass as she walked. When she got to the edge of the pond the sun had almost risen above the trees in the distance. She looked out across the pond. It was still. Like glass. Like a mirror. She felt her chest tighten. Her body anticipated pain. She anticipated sadness, expected the habitual response, but something different happened. She looked at the blue sky reflected in the water, and she started to laugh. She looked at everything around her and she laughed. She looked up at the sky. The clouds always seem to move slow until you really look at them. It made her dizzy. The sky. The world. It was so much bigger than what she was, what she would ever be. The clouds didn’t seem to care. They continued to dance across the sky, articulating the insignificance of it all.

Maybe that was okay. Maybe there was no designed destination. Maybe Angela was right.

Maybe life was just about living.

Then she heard it. The throaty coo in a tone so deep she put her hand to her chest to feel the reverberations. The owl had come back.

She felt the despair claw up to her throat and the empty void in her chest, but she saw the sun finally rise above the rushes and catch the surface of the water. She saw the pussy willow buds without smelling their decay. She heard the songbirds over the cawing of death in the distance. She felt the breaking of day instead of the inevitable impending darkness. It was finally outside of her. She was finally outside of herself.

*Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case
never bothered by diapers or dust,
never arguing over the timing of an egg,
never telling the same story twice,
never getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.
That Story.*

- Anne Sexton
“Cinderella.” *Transformations* (56-57)

*To see you, I read my own entrails
with as much certainty as that occult
art commands. I mime
what I learned from you.
In the deep end of the pool,
I was doing what the swimming instructor
told us to do—removing a life jacket
while treading water—but I wasn't treading water
because I didn't know how. I could not cry “help!”
I'd learned to keep silent in distress.
...
...choking
on chlorinated water...*

- Alyda Faber
“Portrait: Hidden” *Poisonous If Eaten Raw* (21)

Afterword: *House of Hollow Bones*

I wish I could begin this afterword telling readers that I began this work honestly, but I can't. The truth is that the process of writing this novella was a painful lesson in truth. Each time I came to my computer to write and re-write it was as if another layer of my own self-deception was being stripped away. I felt vulnerable, even ashamed of the feelings I dared to record, of the feelings I dared to invoke with my words. I would be lying if I said that in time, I became comfortable with the vulnerability, but I have come to understand its necessity. When I first proposed this project, I expressed that I, as well as people in my family, have struggled with mental illness. We *have*—past tense—as if there was a box labelled “depression” sealed and sitting up in our attic, gathering dust between the box labelled “eating disorder” and the broken rocking chair I told myself I would fix one day. I used the words ‘struggle with’ as if mental illness was something exterior, something that could be separated from our existence. I thought that if I could only cut myself off from the shadows, isolate and amputate my being from the monster, from the mental failure, then I might be free to find a self truly worthy of living. As a woman and a mother, this notion of establishing a sense of worth, a sense of identity, outside domestic and administrative service continues to elude me, as I know it does others. After the distractions of having young children passed, I could no longer evade the questions that had once only lingered nonchalantly in my periphery. I could no longer prevent them from claiming space because one son needed a bath and the other needed to be rocked to sleep. They haunted my every thought, hunting and burning through each carefully crafted and meticulously maintained social ideology. *Who am I? What is my purpose? Do I deserve happiness? What about pleasure? And what about these incessant desires? Is having the desire for something more than I have shameful? Am I not worthy of more?* Bombarded with uncertainty, I tried to fit myself neatly

within other categories so I could identify the problem to be fixed. Was this depression again or simply an existential crisis? I began looking to the past, searching for answers or rather reasons for these feelings. I thought back to when I was younger, trying to root out the source of my despondency. Maybe if I had been a better daughter, or a better sister, maybe I was too selfish, maybe I wasn't selfish enough, maybe if I was honest during the psych assessment I would be fixed by now, maybe if I didn't take all those pills, maybe..., maybe..., maybe.... Memory is elusive. It resides in an abyss of convolution and deviance and dons the face of authenticity. It feeds into feelings of guilt, regret, contempt, bitterness, and grief that complicate familial relationships. I wrote *House of Hollow Bones* to create a space to explore these ideas and emotions and how they influence familial relationships. To blur the lines that constitute "healthy" thought and mental privation. Did I succeed in my aim? That question I leave to my reader. In what follows I will indicate my inspiration and influences and describe the idiosyncrasies of my process. I will explain my narrative choices and point to themes and motifs that grew from the text, while also, exploring ways into the text, specifically through modernist theories of identity and feminist readings.

Inspiration, Process, and Influences:

Jacques Derrida is the influence behind the novella's deconstruction of a linear timeline and my decision to include multiple narrators. My intention behind this fragmented form is to encourage empathy for each character, to eliminate an obvious boundary between protagonist and antagonist, and complicate ideas of identity. In the space that blooms between the past and the present there exists a place in which to explore ideas of identity and self-worth, and to question not only the scripts society hands us, but the scripts we bind ourselves to. How much

control over our identities do we have? Can sorrow be ignored or forgotten? Can we choose to forget our grief? What are the effects when emotion is contained, bound, or repressed? Can a sense of moral or familial duty outweigh the impulse towards meaninglessness? How does guilt write itself on our bodies? If memories become rewritten with each remembrance, what happens to identity? When emotion is written, does it somehow become material? Can it be shared, become a threat, or a weapon? Questions like these demand self-analysis and often result in identifying, re-questioning, and fracturing socially accepted frameworks that underpin ideas of self and being as whole, defined, or individually bound. The novella questions these boundaries by fracturing the narration through refusing a linear chronology, and interspersing memories, half-recollections, and musings in order to expand and contract a character's present. But like Derrida, the text doesn't aim at erasing or refuting identity in so much as expanding and exploring the resulting spaces. Instead of seeing identity as an enclosing around or sequestering of an individual within finite limits, the novella aims to fracture these borders by "multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply" (Derrida 29). We can pose the same question to definitions of identity that Derrida asks of limits. What happens when the borders we use to construct identity "can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible. What are the edges of a limit [or a being] that grows and multiplies by feeding on an abyss?" (31). I think this is a compelling way to think about mental illness. When do thoughts cross the limit of normalcy and become deranged? What defines healthy thinking? My own search for meaning, purpose, wholeness and goodness pushes me towards a threshold I cannot recognize. It exists beyond a limit I cannot reach. At what point does my stability become instability? At what point does my thinking become sick? Is it the act of dying, or the desire for death, or the haunting thoughts of

my own mortality that define one as ill? And what is the roll of society or at the microcosm, family? How does one create self-worth once they have been told the way they think is flawed, damaged, and diseased.

Further inspiration comes from writers who have experimented with form and narrative perspectives. These include non-linear narration, epistolary narratives, and experimental prose and long poems, such as Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*. Both Bellow and Carson explore constructions of self through forms of fictional biography. Carson uses a third person narrator and shifting perspective to recount Geryon's life through a collection of key moments and observations from which his identity or *autobiography* is constructed. At an early age Geryon becomes aware of the "difference/between outside and inside" (Carson 29) and he chooses to curate his identity by "set[ting] down all inside things...[and] omit[ting] all outside things" (29). Geryon's observations of the outside world are recounted in verse with minimal emotional context, and while this resonates a tone of detachment, the assemblage of observations contains poignant meaning because they are specific to Geryon's "inside" perspective. The tension that is created ultimately blurs the boundary between inside and outside, self and other. In *Herzog*, narrative form is used to echo the fragile emotional state of the protagonist, Moses. The narrative is interrupted by memories and shifts between past and present. The narration includes letters written by Moses and these allow the perspective to shift from third person into first person. All these shifts illustrate Moses's frantic and erratic search for personal meaning after an existential crisis. In *House of Hollow Bones*, I was interested in experimenting with form by alternating prose and verse, fragmenting the timeline by inserting memories and dreams, and shifting between characters' points of view, to echo the fragile and fractured emotional and psychological states of Edie, Angela, and Frank.

As much as I wished to echo the condition of the character's mind states through the form of the novella, I also wanted the text to embody the experience of these states. I turned my attention to the stream-of-consciousness narrative mode, exemplified in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Anais Nin's *Cities of the Interior*. In each of these texts, in the portraits of women they created, I could recognize myself. Not as an individual but as a woman, in the emotion, the tone, and in the image of society that was recreated. As I reflected on my own experiences in the process of writing *House of Hollow Bones*, like Nin's protagonist, Djuna, in *Ladders to Fire*, I often found myself retreating from reality, entangled as she is within the labyrinth of her own thoughts:

She should not even wait for the end of the Party to commit her daily act of destruction.

So she stood alone in her square defended by her own bristles and began: "No one is paying any attention to me. I should not have worn this green dress: it's too loud. I've just said the wrong thing to Brancusi. All these people have accomplished something and I have not. They put me in a panic. They are all so strong and so sure of themselves. I feel exactly as I did in my dream last night: I had been asked to play at a concert. There were so many people. When I went to play, the piano had no notes, it was a lake, and I tried to play on the water and no sound came. I felt defeated and humiliated. I hate the way my hair gets wild. (123)

The passage is a vortex of tendrils, an evocation of dream fragments and sensory observations that provokes feelings of claustrophobic social anxiety and self-doubt. While it is written as a deeply personal passage, isolation and loneliness are not unique to Djuna. In *House of Hollow Bones*, I wanted to explore stream-of-consciousness narration to give voice to isolating aspects of mental illness, aspects that I had experienced. With all these precedents set before me, I felt the

weight of expectation on my chest. I knew what shape I wanted my text to take, but with so many colliding ideas, Djuna was not the only one put “in a panic” (123). I needed to find a way to organize my thoughts and understand my characters without the specificity of words. I turned to my canvas.

When I began writing my thesis, the world was a year into the pandemic already and the initial optimism and novel interest in the perks of working remotely had waned. Although before Covid-19 reared its ugly head, I was required to carve out time and space for myself, away from my children’s demands and domestic duties, to find a place to think and to breathe and to be, the pandemic magnified the need for and difficulty of this. Besides those standard expectations, I was suddenly required to teach and supervise and gatekeep, while trying to work and learn and create something of my own. Lines Woolf wrote about Charlotte Brontë in *A Room of One’s Own* haunted my thoughts and plagued my ambition:

[I]f one reads them [the pages of *Jane Eyre*] over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. (68)

If Brontë couldn’t do it, how on earth could I? I was isolated and I felt a deep sense of loneliness without ever actually being alone. It is a loneliness that bores deep down into your bones and its appetite was ferocious. It slowly, unrelentingly, chewed away hundreds of gnarly channels. The spongy remnants could do little to keep the strength that slowly leached from my bones. The act of breathing almost became too much of an effort. Writing felt like too large a task. I had so many ideas colliding inside my head to make sense out of any of it in writing, so I picked up my

paint brush instead. I took myself as my subject and chose to explore perspectives of my body that could only be viewed through the eyes of another, or, as it was in my case, through the optic lens of my camera. It was my attempt to make peace with myself. To face myself as not a woman but as human. My intention was to paint a picture of myself that I could never see firsthand, unfiltered by my phone or multiple mirrors. I felt both terrified and vulnerable as I forced my brush to replicate the size of my nose and the lines around my mouth. I tried to paint honestly, so that I might find a balance between the generosity that others must apply when they look at me and the criticism with which I see myself. When I finished the self-portrait, I showed it to my youngest sister and she said to me, "That's not your nose, that's more like mine, your nose doesn't curve so much at the bottom." After my initial irritation subsided, I realized she had a point, although not about the curve of my doppelganger's nose. Maybe meaning doesn't lie in the way I see myself, or in the way others see me. Maybe meaning lies in the connections between us. The way she sees herself in me and the way I see myself in her. The way I allow myself to feel compassionate towards her faults might show me a way towards self-compassion. Although I could not organize these ideas fully, I felt compelled to try and I sat at my computer to write. I am not alone in my dissatisfaction of the social frameworks that bind women to categories like mother, wife, caregiver, lover, whore, whole or broken. I am not alone in recognizing an overwhelming emptiness in individualism. I found validation for the emotional abyss I had tried so hard to contain and keep hidden. As I wrote my draft, I continued painting and began on a series of paintings inspired by and including my initial self-portrait. It became a series of three portraits (figs. 1-3), which helped me explore and think through ideas of identity in relation to human connection and familial relationships.

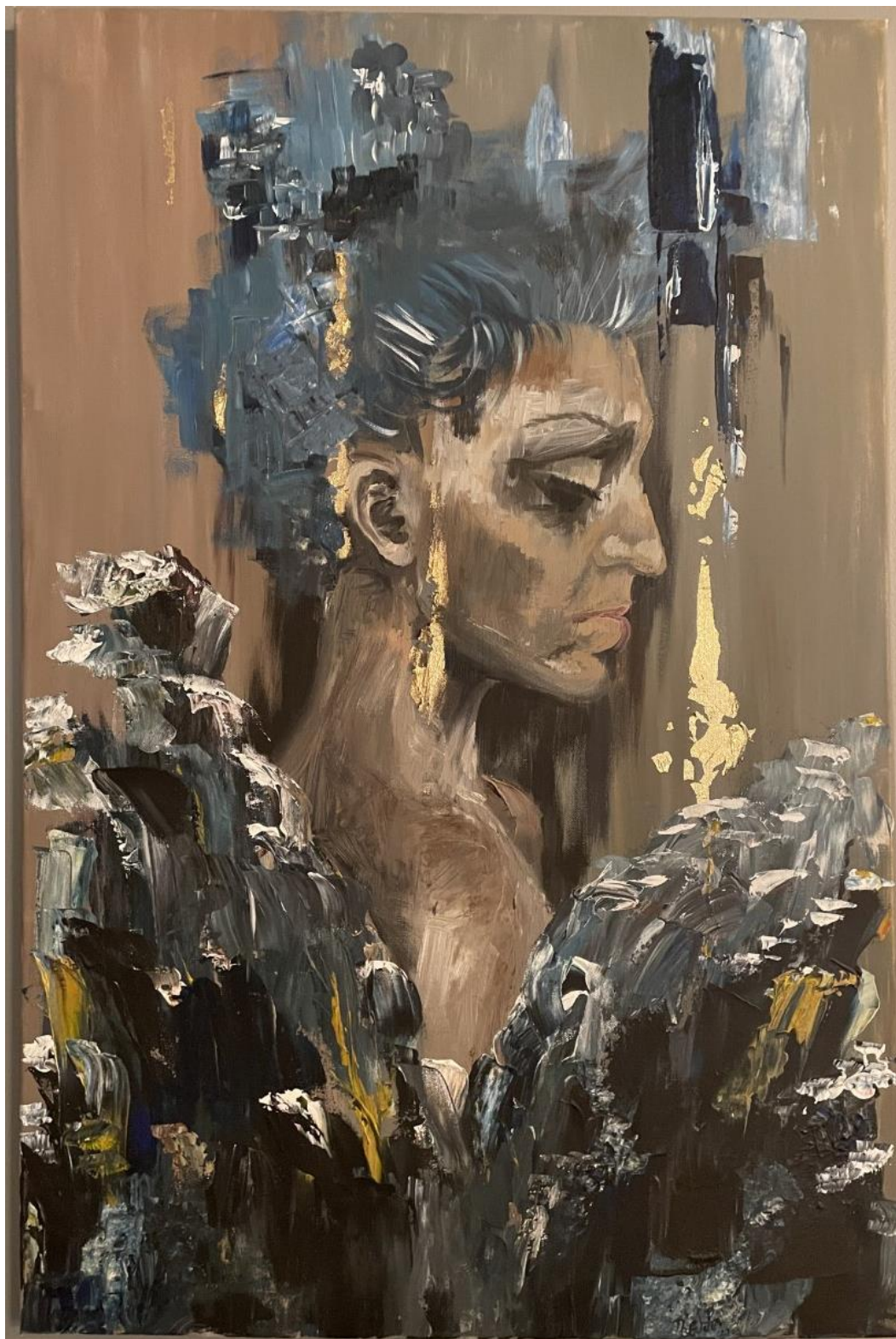


Figure 1: Natalie LoVetri, *Making Peace*. Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 2021.

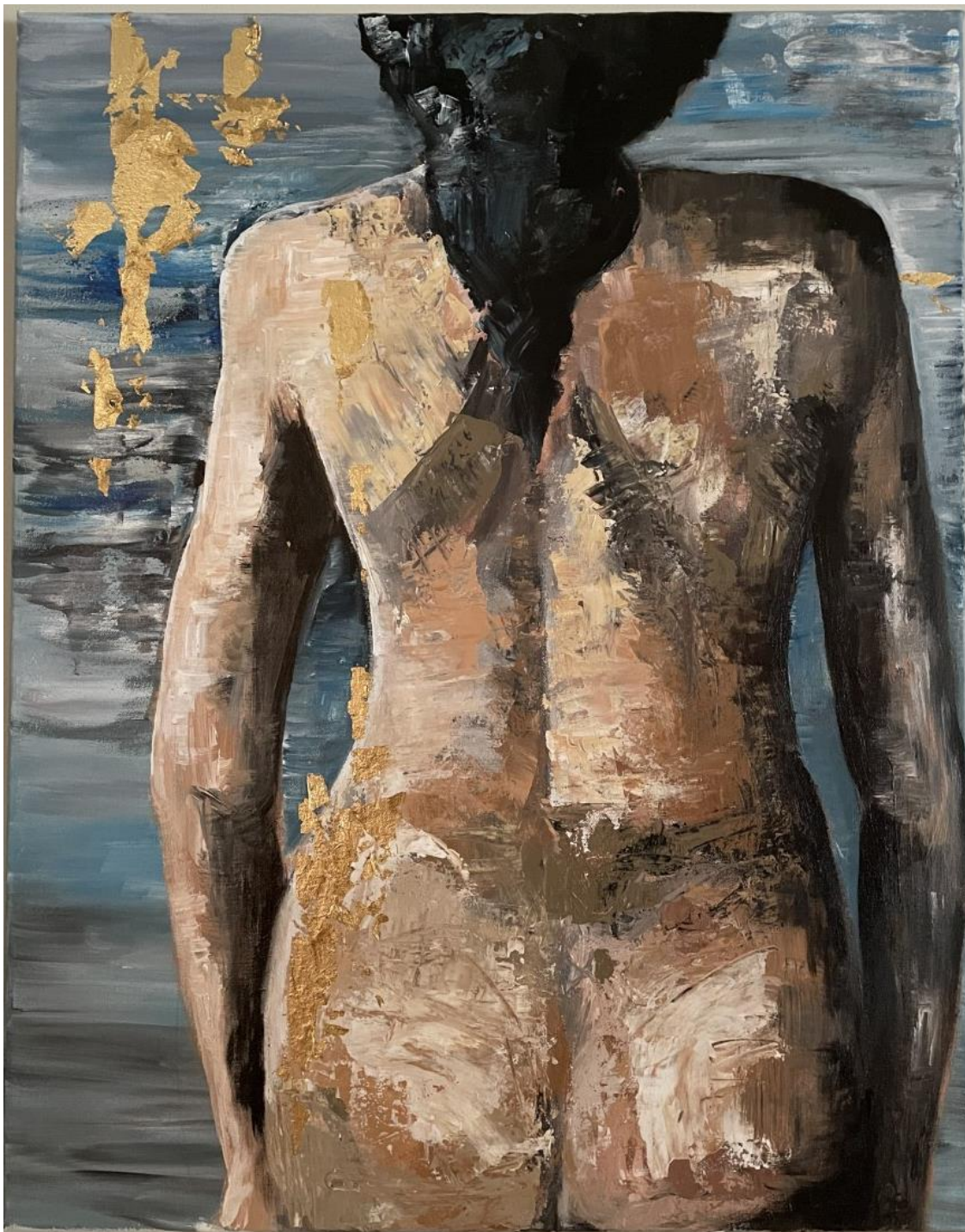


Figure 2: Natalie LoVetri. *Edna P.* Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 2021.

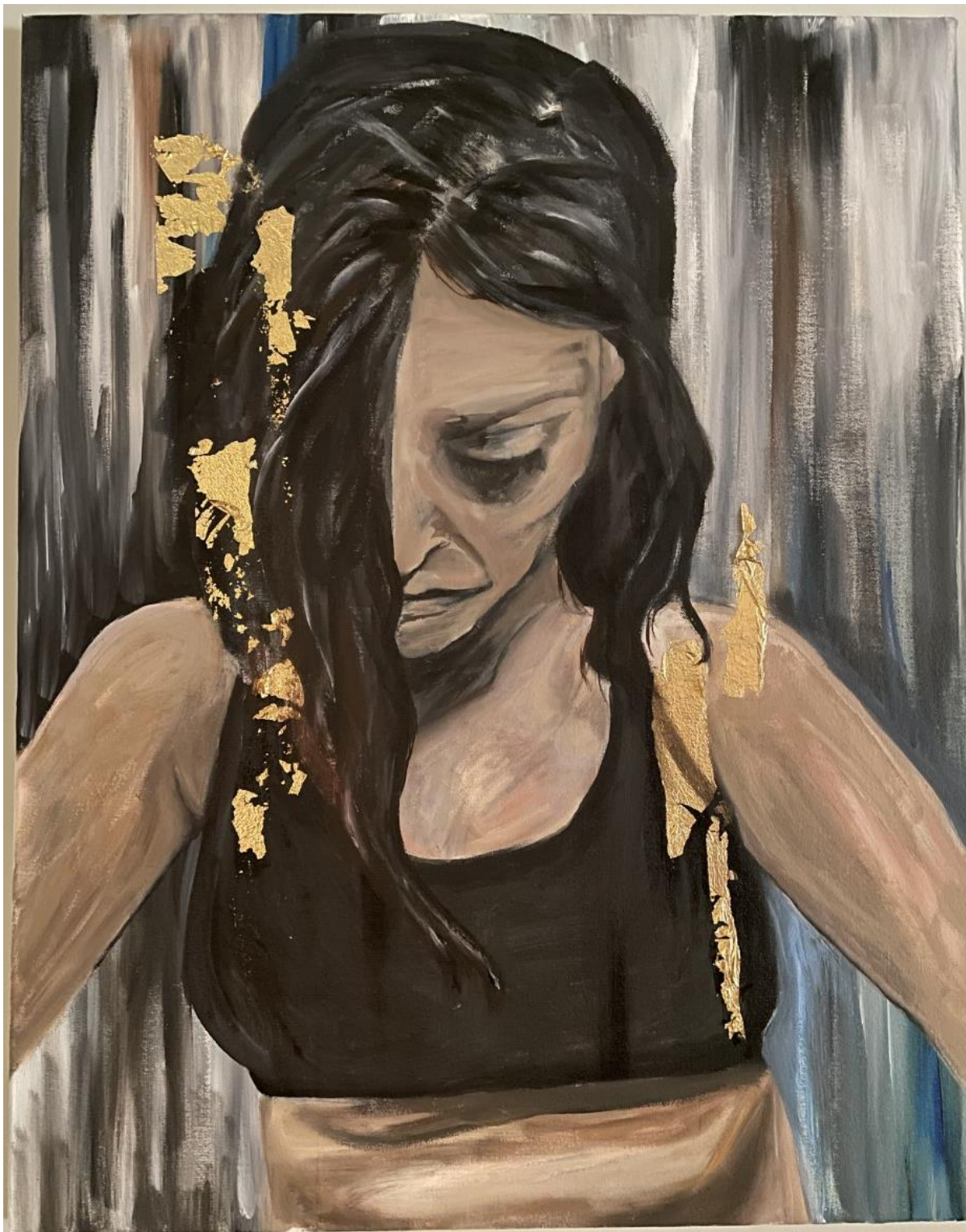


Figure 3: Natalie LoVetri. *Resolve*- incomplete. Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 2022.

Although this motivated my choice to use my own lived experience as inspiration for the first draft, in my first draft the prose and verse remained elusive and overly abstract. There was an underlying fear of exposure and a fear of judgement that prevented me from writing sincerely and openly articulating a narrative arch. The story was too fractured. I thought the abstract nature of my prose would provide a greater opportunity for readers to insert their own readings, their own voices into my work. Meditations on Roland Barthes's ideas of "author" and "scriptor" (1271) had me questioning the role 'I' as author should or in fact could play in the text. I set aside my draft. I needed time and space in order to resituate my writing outside the pieces of text floating around in my mind. This distancing revealed a misstep. In my attempt to show restraint with my narrative, I had underestimated my reader by thinking that if I presented them with too much of the story, they would be unable to read into it their own meanings or pull out their own questions. One of my main goals in writing this novella was for it to be accessible. I wanted to provide readers with as many ways into the narrative as possible. Using my own lived experience, again, as a basis, I returned to my draft to more fully flesh out and ground my characters. I tried to anchor abstract descriptions of emotions to the characters' recollections of their pasts. The sections of verse that had fractured the narrative needed to be integrated to increase accessibility and to cement the story line. This pushed the storyline forward but not without a cost. I could no longer escape myself in the text. Each section I wrote was haunted by my own shadow. Subsequent re-readings of my work revealed the need for another shift in my process. A bifurcation between myself and my characters was necessary for the novella to escape the categorization of memoir and support a shape of its own. So that it might inspire meaning outside of what Woolf labels the overbearing "shadow shaped something like the letter 'I'" (96)

from getting in the way. An 'I' with which, at this point, I was beginning to grow thoroughly sick. I set my draft aside and returned to literature.

I read Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* and after acquiescing into the pull of despondent inevitability I found myself resurfacing with more questions about how one constructs ideas of self. Does the mental state in which we recall the past influence how we shape ourselves in the present? What details capture our focus and how do they contribute to the tone of our recollections? Why is it that I remember sitting on the windowsill and hanging my legs out of my second-floor apartment in Den Haag? I was thirteen. Why is it I remember the sounds of the street, how the footsteps would echo off the red brick of the identical row house apartments that made up our neighborhood? What other sounds had echoed off those brick walls that had somehow survived the 1940 bombings of *Slag om Den Haag*? Why do I remember the colour of the sky that day? How the dusky shades of twilight bluey grey were fragmented by thin horizons of clouds whose edges would turn a muddy brown as they thinned to reveal the open sky beyond. Or the windows that caught the sun and reflected the blinding golden light as the sun slowly buried itself behind the suburban skyline. Was it the heaviness on my heart, or the desire for escape that allow these memories to persist? Does the memory facilitate who I am and how I feel in the present or does my present state of mind instruct what and how I remember? Exploring ways in which to address these questions has different implications for mental illness.

I had always been drawn to Sexton and Plath ever since I was a teenager, but as I revisited their poetry over the course of writing my thesis, I feared at times that I might not be able to move forward. I feared everything had already been said, after all, Edie wasn't alone, Sexton too had "dream[ed] of drowning" (107). A line from Sexton's poem for Sylvia Plath often repeats in my head: "what is your death/ but an old belonging" (128), and I wonder if I

might create belonging with words and without death. If, instead of “anointing myself daily/ with my little poisons” (169), I reached out my hand in search of connection, and like Edie, squeezed when I found it. I pushed forward with my writing, clinging desperately to the shimmering shard of silver I had stumbled on at the edges of darkness. Maybe Plath was right, “perhaps/ such sophistry can placate us” (307). My confidence waxed and waned like the moon. I found myself doubting my aim. I found myself questioning whether the world really needed another sad poem, another cathartic emotional exorcism, when I came across Albert Camus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes: “For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers.... This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me.... Forever I shall be a stranger to myself” (19). Camus posits that, as human beings we are in constant conflict, existing in the paradox of having the desire to discover the meaning of life while knowing there can never be a satisfactory answer to this question. To acknowledge this is to face the absurd. For me, *The Myth of Sisyphus* transplanted the questions berating my existence from the category of sick, diseased, and aberrant to the category of human. This recategorization allowed me to find not only an empathy for my own mental state but the ability to empathize with my characters. It also allowed me to step into Edie and Angela’s perspectives without an inherited bias from my own lived experience.

Narrative Choices and Themes:

From the outset of this project, one of my key interests has been experimenting with the form of the novella. I am interested in how different forms can reflect the psychological mindset of characters. I mentioned earlier that I wanted to create multiple ways of reading the text. One

way of creating this was to have multiple narrative voices by writing from an omniscient third person point of view. Using this perspective also allowed the narration of each character to ebb and flow as their own mind states shifted. For the most part, Edie is consumed by what's going on in her head. The narration shifts between her interior thoughts, her bodily reactions, and the world around her. The omniscient narrator provides a connection between these elements before the character themselves might. The landscape echoes the misgivings and doubts that Edie's subconscious has begun weaving. Before going to talk to Frank, after his fight with Angela at Edie's house, Edie remembers a dream. In the dream she is drowning. She looks up for a saviour, to a man whose "eyes hold the universe out of reach" (LoVetri 10). We are not told who the man is. Throughout the narrative, Edie gives men the power to define who she is, whether they are tyrant or saviour, and this is echoed in how she is often portrayed as having to literally look up at them. Edith looks to her father as the patriarchal head of the family. Her emotional state growing up is often in reaction to Frank's. His disposition instructs Edie on how to act, how to feel, and how to exist in his presence. Even in death, Edith is forced to look up at his body hanging from the rafters. When she meets Adrien, his presence electrifies the very air between them, forcing her to "pay attention to the space slowly contracting between her body and his" (62). When he takes her to smash bottles at the riverbank, he shows her how to feel "powerful, alive" (64), but for Edie, his confidence in her is just another type of pressure; the expectation of happiness, the expectation of normalcy. She struggles to reflect what she feels he wants her to be. He becomes "too good" (19) for her. Like the man in her dream, Adrien's reality is out of reach.

In Edith's dream there is also a sense that she has been left for dead and she eerily seems to acknowledge and accept this fate. Later in the story, when she is looking out the kitchen window with her father, this emotion is echoed. She watches a crow with the carcass of a small

bird “pinned under its claw” (16). It is “picking and pulling at it [the dead bird] with its beak” (15) while other crows look on hungrily. This happens after her father asks her to talk to Angela about her fixation on finding Tommy. This preoccupation with death might be read as actual death, Edith does come close to actually entering the “midnight of under-water” (10), but it might also be read as a metaphysical death, a death or dissolution of identity. We might read this death as a type of boredom. In *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom*, Allison Pease writes:

[I]t is useful to understand boredom not simply as an experience of disgusting weariness (tedium), but importantly as a moment in which that which contains one as a discreet entity has been pierced—bored—so that there is no longer an impregnable barrier between what is outside and what is inside. Boredom is a metaphorical permeability, an awareness of, at the same time that one is without, subjectivity. (Pease 4)

Edie’s character might be read as being bored in this sense. She feels hollow or empty—bored out. She can’t seem to find pleasure by any means, and she laments bitterly, “even my desire has left me” (LoVetri 17). In the wake of this emptiness, Edie searches her past for meaning and a knowledge of self.

In fragmenting Edie’s narration with flashbacks and memories, I aimed to reveal the fragmentation in her own internal ideas of self. The form expresses Edie’s search for her own identity and meaning and how these are interlaced with and how they might be disentangled from her desires, her memories, and her present life. Similar to how the shifts in the timeline interrupt and escape the narrative arch, Edie herself, is torn between the desire to forget her infidelity and escape the chaos that comprised her upbringing while simultaneously feeling overwhelming guilt and shame for feeling dissatisfied and unfulfilled—bored with the domestic

normalcy that characterizes her present life with Adrien and Jacob, while believing she doesn't deserve it. When Angela returns from Toronto, the past that Edie has tried so hard to repress begins to resurface. It breaks through the façade she has tried so long to uphold. The past is a threat, but it also may be a means to escape the limitations of who she currently sees herself as. It provides a justification for the compelling pull towards the self-annihilation that Edie tries to convince herself she doesn't crave. Edie searches her past in an attempt to allocate agency and dispel guilt. Did she really intend to go to that party with Angela to get pregnant? If she hadn't seen those ovulation tests, would she still have been unfaithful? How much could she really blame on the alcohol? The choice haunts her in the present but also manipulates her memory. Edie's questioning of her past and lack of confidence in her memory is depicted in the fragmented and fractured timeline within her narrative arch. Although Angela's narrative utilizes flashbacks also, it is communicated in a more linear fashion than Edie's.

Angela's narrative arch is organized around her search for her mother. Her recollections of the past serve to bolster this motivation. She is convinced that when she finds her mother, the gaps in her identity will be filled and the faults, corrected. Who she is will finally make sense. She is confident that her recollection of the past will be verified by Tommy and also justify her attitude towards Frank. Angela is counting on Tommy to make her whole and foundation her being, to understand "why [she's] so fucked up" (117). Although Angela trusts her memories and seems confident in her present convictions and identity, she is haunted by a fear of losing control. This fear is conveyed when she confides in Logan that she feels she like she is watching her life from outside herself and she "can't do anything about it...[but] watch as life carries [her] out to sea" (107). As much as this terrifies her, there is a sense that she is torn between the freedom from consciousness this abandonment would permit and the utter lack of control it

entails. She longs to “bury all feeling, all sense of guilt, ...independence, autonomy, [and even] free will” (107) but she is terrified to surrender to living perfunctorily, as one mindless and “along for the ride” (107). This tension between needing control and longing for surrender manifests physically in her disordered eating.

Frank’s perspective provides a contrast to both Edie and Angela’s narrative arcs and illustrates the difference between external and internal ideas of self in connection with the gendered social frameworks the characters live within. Frank’s narrative arch, if read as a journey of becoming, is linear, consecutive, chronological. It plays with and emphasises the masculinity inherent in ideals introduced by 19th century conceptions of self-reliance and transcendental individuality. Frank expresses no self-doubt and any impediments are perceived as external. He was an artist from the beginning and this creative energy has always lived inside of him, it defines him. When a muse fades, he finds another one, but the creative energy on which he foundations his identity is always there. When he begins to lose his eyesight and the barriers shift from external to intrinsic, he feels his essence has been assaulted. The violence this disability inflicts on Frank’s identity is echoed in his violent destruction of his studio. He cannot shift his idea of self and the death of his identity is mirrored by his decision to kill his body.

While Frank’s narrative might be read through a sociological lens, my initial motivation behind including it was to reveal the narrow lens through which Edith and Angela perceive their father. Establishing Frank’s past not only helps to flesh out his character, but it also complicates his own motivations and his relationship with his daughters. It raises questions surrounding generational trauma and the influence of particular familial relationships on memory and identity and it opens the door to empathy. Although Frank acts out the patriarch, how much of his act is simply a re-action? How many of his characteristics where informed by Clyde’s belt or his

mother's submissiveness; by the environment in which he grew up? As a society, how much weight does this carry, or should this carry? Many of Frank's struggles were invisible to his daughters; his drinking, the severity of his glaucoma, the overwhelming poignancy of his loneliness and isolation. What is lost when we try to categorize and define people, either as individuals or within groups? How are familial relationships limited by the definitions that construct father, mother, daughter, sister? Edith and Angela's relationship changed after Frank's death, the patriarch of the family. Their relationship became sincere through revealing their vulnerabilities. This might be read as an example of mutual loss fueling connection, but it also might be read allegorically as a turning away from patriarchal societies, from vertical hierarchies to horizontal exchanges between women. On this plane a woman isn't circumscribed to the meanings and identity she is allocated within, she is free to move unrestrained through evolutions of self and being.

For Edie, sex and sexual desire are complicated. In her imagination, the sexual desire she feels towards Logan and the fantasies that she entertains might be read as a means of escape. It can also be read as a knee-jerk reaction to the fairy-tale imagery she constructed around her life with Adrien. An involuntary revolt against happily ever after. While these fantasies temporarily remove her from the messiness of reality, they also mirror a past in which her desire and sexuality signal a kind of independence. These fantasies remove the need to rectify feelings of guilt, shame, and worthlessness that became entangled with and complicate feelings of pleasure. Through memory, Edie's sexuality is framed as a means of revolt, a reckless attempt at attaining control through the act of relinquishing her body. This act of autonomy, though, is complicated by the physical spaces these acts take place in. These interactions often take place in a public bathroom, on the back of a toilet or up against the sink. Edie's recollections of her own sexual

liberty are recalled within an atmosphere of disgust and filth. In her search for identity and meaning, ideas of self percolate within this atmosphere, conflating sexual desire and physical connection with feelings of shame and degradation. Her desire for independence and autonomy becomes figured as something shameful, underpinned with feelings of disgust and self-loathing. These feelings taint her intimacy with Adrien and Edie is unable to fully surrender herself in those moments. She cannot allow Adrien to perceive what she keeps coiled beneath her skin; the secrets caught in the “mildew covered caulked corners” (18) of her body. Edie’s experience of their intimacy is portrayed as breaking boundaries, re-drawing borders, and containment. Overshadowed by her previous sexual experiences and the connections she has constructed between these and her identity and self-worth, sexual intimacy with Adrien fractures her sense of self, she is left somewhat deteriorated, like the “crumbling grout between the floor tiles” (19) she stares at in their bathroom. The association of female sexual desire and sex with guilt, shame and disgust is carried further in water imagery throughout the text and its association with purity, renewal, and rebirth.

Water is often associated with truth, purity, rebirth and forgiveness. Its fluidity resembles the plasticity of a dream. Light does not pierce its surface unscathed but is rather refracted, reflected, and distorted. In “Tales of a Tub,” Sylvia Plath explores ideas of reality, perception and disillusionment resonant in the act of perceiving parts of her body under water:

We take the plunge; under water our limbs
 waver, faintly green, shuddering away
 from the genuine color of skin; can our dreams
 ever blur the intransigent lines which draw
 the shape that shuts us in? absolute fact

intrudes even when the revolted eye
 is closed; the tub exists behind our back;
 its glittering surfaces are blank and true.

 ...in faith
 we shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail
 among sacred islands of the mad till death
 shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real. (25)

Water is a recurrent image in the novella that connects to both life and death. At the beginning of the story, Edith is washing the dishes. Frank lets a plate slip from his hands and it breaks across the floor. Near the end of the story, when Edith decides to show Angela the letters, she is looking in the mirror and the cup she is filling runs over in the sink. While the steam of the shower “thicken[s] the air” (LoVetri 60), creating a liminal space between her emotions and the outside world, the cold water of the pond offers death, a release from the monster caged in her chest, the “one who breaths and is not alive” (68). After her recollection of Angela’s near drowning when they were both children, Edith’s pull towards the lake and her imagined drowning might be read as a form of self-retribution, an attempt to obtain healing or forgiveness. What most interests me in this imagery is how it seemed to grow organically from the text, of its own accord. In the story, water seems to reveal truths. It is after Edith’s trip to the pond’s edge and after Angela slips in the shower, that each sister can meet each other and communicate honestly, free from the dirt and obscurity of preconceptions and prejudice. Free from a history that has festered, trapped within their bones.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 3rd Edition, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, 1268-1272.
- Bellow, Saul. *Herzog*. Penguin Classics, 2001.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Second Edition, Vintage International, 2018.
- Carson, Anne. *Autobiography of Red*. McClelland & Stewart, 2016.
- . *The Albertine Workout*. New Directions Poetry Pamphlet #13, New Directions Publishing Corp., 2014.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal that Therefore I am*. Edited by Marie-Luise Mallet, translated by David Wills, Fordham University Press, 2008, *Wordpress*, <https://grattoncourses.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/the-animal-that-therefore-i-am-jacques-derrida-ed-marie-louis-mallet-tr-david-wills.pdf>
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Double*. Dover Publications Inc., 1997.
- Faber, Alyda. *Poisonous If Eaten Raw*. Goose Lane Editions, 2021.
- Kroetsch, Robert. *Post-glacial: The Poetry of Robert Kroetsch*. Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2019.
- . *Seed Catalogue*. Turnstone Press, 2010.
- Laurence, Margaret. *The Stone Angel*. Seal Books, McClelland and Stewart-Bantam Ltd., 1980.
- Lawrence, D. H. "Sun." *A Modern Lover and Other Stories*. Ballantine Books, 1969.
- . "The Princess." *A Modern Lover and Other Stories*. Ballantine Books, 1969.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. Vintage International, 2004.
- Nin, Anais. *Cities of the Interior*. Swallow Press/ Ohio UP, 1980.

- Pease, Allison. *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Pessoa, Fernando. *The Book of Disquiet*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa, Serpent's Tail, 2010.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2018.
- Rippl, Gabriele, and Philipp Schweighauser, et al., editors. *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma*. University of Toronto Press, 2013.
- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. Mariner Books, 1999.
- . *Transformations*. Mariner Books, 2001.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *Recollections of My Nonexistence*. Penguin Books. 2020.
- Solomon, Andrew. *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*. Scribner, 2001.
- Turner, R.L. "Fragmented Narration and Multiple Path Readings: Towards the Creation of Reader Driven Texts." *Neophilologus*, vol. 89, 2005, pp. 495–508. *Springer*, <https://doi-org.uml.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s11061-005-5278-y>
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Vintage Classics, 1929.
- . *The Voyage Out*. Barnes & Noble Classics. 2004.