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Not Fade Away

By Jean Catherine Nastasi

Thesis Advisor: Linsey Abrams

May 4, 2012

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York
You take my hand,
I'll take your hand
Together we may get away
This much madness
is too much sorrow
It's impossible
to make it today.

Down By the River, Neil Young
One

“Pilot to tower! Pilot to tower, do you read me? Pilot to tower!” The call is urgent, but Daniel’s vehicle is in no danger. He holds the car’s cigarette lighter close to his lips and shouts into it. A cigarette now lit dangles from his mouth; his deep set eyes dance. Such a delight; how fatherly, to pretend an object is something it is not. With his other hand he bangs the steering wheel to the beat of the cassette player. She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah Above it all through the open window a strong current gushes into the Jeep. Lucy’s blonde hair whips into her mouth and nose. It snags in her eyelashes.

“Pilot to tower! Here Lucy, talk to ‘em. Tell ‘em our coordinates.” Her father hands her the lighter carefully and her pale fingers tremble as she brings the knob to her lip but she can’t bring herself to play his game, so she passes it back to him. He is ready to move on anyway. He swings a thick arm out the open window, cigarette ash showering the highway as the glossy green car speeds on into the May afternoon.

“Did you have fun at the zoo, Lucy?”

“Yes, Daddy,” but she hadn’t. The air in the Hall of Primates had been moist with the stench of waste and the screeching of crouching beasts rang in the tin benches that lined the room. Lucy stared at the sad-eyed chimps behind
smudged glass in their tiled quarters. One of them swung on a metal trapeze, shitting into his paw and eating it. Lucy felt the prick of tears in her eyes as she stood there with her father, fists balled inside the pockets of her jumper. Daniel had leaned over, speaking into her ear. “Get a load of those chimps, Lucy, will you? Don’t they know any better?”

Lucy had wondered what her father saw when he looked at the animals. Of course, they knew no better, of course. She had rubbed her eyes with her sleeve, looking down at her shoes until it was time to move on to the next exhibit. Father and daughter had stepped outside into a swelling rain. “Run, Lucy! We don’t have an umbrella, you don’t want to melt. Run,” her father cried, fleeing ahead of her across the empty parking lot. His loafers clicked on the concrete; rain pelted his jeans, his sleek black hair. Lucy sloshed through puddles in her Mary Janes as she ran to catch up to him. By the time she reached the car; her tights were soaked through up to the calves.

Now on the way home, under a newly quiet sky, her father turns up the dial on the car stereo and pumps his arms to the deafening Help, I need somebody, Help

“God gave us this day, Lucy. It’s a gift,” he raises a fist in the air and shakes it, “a beautiful gift!” he shouts into the wind.

The girl picks at her scabby knees, blood dotting the surface of her tights. She watches it spread out quickly, suddenly nervous about what her mother will
say when they get home.

“What do you think about God, Lucy? He loves you more than anyone. You know, you should love him more than you love yourself.”

“I love God, Daddy.” Lucy stares out the window at the yellow diamond signs flying by. “FALLING ROCK,” they warn. Steep grey cliffs flank the road, loose stones kept in check by a netting of gleaming chicken wire. She wonders whether the wire is enough.

“Your mother doesn’t love God enough, Lucy. Your mother is cold. She needs to let God in, you know. If she would just let him in,” Daniel pauses, “The problem is parents. Because they’re always called it ‘manners,’ but it’s ice, Lucy. It’s stone. Your mother needs shaking up a little, know what I mean?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s why she’s got me,” Daniel squeezes his daughter’s shoulder, “Lord knows your grandma isn’t going to do it.”

“Grandma Dorie is nice.”

“Nice. Yes, she is nice. She is. But guess what, my dear. Nice isn’t love.”

“It’s good to be nice. Grandma doesn’t shout.” Lucy thinks of the time she helped her make a pie, how her grandmother had told her that if you throw the peels on the floor they’ll spell out the initials of the man you’ll marry.

“But shouting is a feeling. It’s real. People aren’t statues, Lucy. Human beings aren’t made of stone. Do you think God just wants us to be nice? What do
you think about God, Lucy?” He looks at her with a dazed expression. She stares at the stubble studding his jaw.

Lucy’s eyes are dry from the wind. Goose pimples tingle their way up her neck and her jacket is at home. Her stomach begins to ache and she realizes with panic that she has to pee. The car is flying along the road; with each bump Lucy feels herself losing control. She wants to cry but instead bites down on the inside of her lip. Are we almost home, Daddy?”

“Jesus, can’t you just enjoy the moment? Nothing is ever enough for you; you always want more no matter what I do. You kids are so greedy, you and your brother both.”

“I have to pee.”

“Goddamn it Lucy, I told you to go before we got in the car!”

“I have to go again,” but she knows it’s too late, feels herself let go, feels the warm trickle and soak under her dress, seeping into her shoes, but she will not cry. She will not.

Her father snaps the music off, and rolls all the windows up. In the silence he thumps a new pack of Lucky Strikes against his palm, then “Jesus, what the hell is wrong with you? It hasn’t even been half an hour yet. I’ll tell you I can’t catch a fucking break. Nothing can just be easy, can it? I’m trying to talk to you, here.” He sighs deeply, his great chest heaving.

Watching him, Lucy realizes she’s been holding her breath. She can smell
her urine; she hopes he can’t. She folds her hands in her lap, thankful none the wet stain is visible on the surface of her clothes.

“Just hold it, for now. Okay, honey? Okay? Can you do that?”

Lucy nods, relieved.

“Good. Now tell me what you think about God.”

“Well, that he, that he loves us?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“That he loves us. I think he loves us.”

“That’s good. Good. And why does he love us? When we are so imperfect, so flawed, why does he love us in spite of all that?”

“Because he’s supposed to. That’s his job.”

Daniel’s laughter erupts, barking out in choppy rasps, a smoker’s laugh.

“Because that’s his job. Wow, from the mouths of—Lucy you are the smartest kid in the whole world. You know so much more than I know. You think in such a special way. Don’t lose that, Lucy. That innocence, that purity is why you can think how you think. I don’t mean it won’t be tough. It’s trouble being so beautiful, and you’ll only get prettier. Boy, do I know that.” For a moment his smile dissolves. The gray puckered skin under his eyes bunches and he strokes her head with his heavy hand. “I love you, my Lucy,” he says quietly, and then louder, “I love my Lucy, and I love you, God! Thank you! Thank you for this day!”
Once again his Beatles cassette is turned on, and with the click of a button, air pours into the car as the sound of her father’s shouting pours out onto the road. Now he hangs his arm out the window again and beats the car door with an open hand, a new cigarette dangling between his fingers, lit embers flying backwards and grazing his sleeve.

Lucy feels her eyelids beginning to droop and she rests her head against the shoulder strap of her seatbelt.

Her father nods toward the cassette player, “Music is a drug, Lucy. People should consider it just as dangerous as cocaine or liquor, or anything else. I am no less addicted to these cigarettes than your brother is to the goddamn Grateful Dead. Music is risky; there’s a transfer of energy that happens when you listen to music. It snatches things out from inside you.” His twisting arm navigates the empty space just in front of him. “Take the Beatles for example. They energize me, my blood pumps when I listen to them yow, boy! This, this is rock ‘n roll, Lucy, this is what it’s about. Not that fucking Jerry Garcia and his Casey Jones cocaine train, Friend of the Devil indeed—the Beatles are perfection of spirit.” Her father turns the dial up again, so much that the bass backdrop of Lennon’s croon *Come together, right now* vibrates through the leather seats, up her thighs. “These assholes in the Grateful Dead want to be heroes, but hedonists can’t be heroes! Who can they save but themselves, and from what other than boredom? Think they’re having so much fun, do you? Well let me tell you something,
Grady. There’s bitterness in hedonism. And there is revenge.”

At the sound of her brother’s name Lucy rouses, nervous again watching her father squint through the windshield as if the sky is the source of his racing thoughts. “Daddy, Grady’s at home.”

“Lucy, be quiet and listen. Hedonists are getting by on nothing because they don’t want to work. They’re lazy. They’re poor and lazy. There’s nothing free about the kind of love these people talk about. Hedonism is about one-upping. It’s all about ‘Well, I’ll show you.’” Going to Hell in a bucket doesn’t matter if you’re enjoying the ride, does it? That’s what they say, alright. But they’re wrong. And these drugs, Lucy, these drugs Jerry Garcia wants everyone to worship are the Devil the way they alter you, change you back and forth. They’ll swing you like a pendulum,” at the end of his outstretched arm his hand swings dumbly from the wrist tick tock “But only if you let them trap you. You can’t let them do it, Lucy; you have to promise me that. No good can come from that kind of blind control! Look at this John Africa. The city’s been coming down on Rizzo and the police force all week, but John Africa is just as responsible for his death as he should have been for his life. These people. So attached to their drugs that they have to remove themselves, break away and they think it’s revolution—it’s mind control, is all it is. It’s the fucking drugs, Lucy.” And quieter, “Fucking drugs.”

When Lucy hears that name John Africa she remembers the Philadelphia
Inquirer on the table earlier in the week, discarded next to an ashtray. Her father’s coffee mug had left behind a ring that encircled the photo of a shirtless man. He was lean and barefoot, wearing jeans. Dreadlocks sprung from his head and his arms were outstretched like a scarecrow’s. A fat policeman had a rifle pointed at the man’s face, just below his deadened eyes. They said to her, “What will be, will be.”

The Jeep turns into the winding driveway, bordered on one side by deep woods of evergreen trees, branches and needles that crunch underfoot, soil that sinks invitingly. On the other side stretches the slope of their front yard, at its summit, in front of the grand brick house is a patio and a large garden of hyacinth and daffodils, lettuce and herbs. The driveway juts sharply to the left as they pull in behind the house. They are surrounded by blooming dogwoods, weeping cherry and crab apple trees. Bruised petals litter the wet pavement. The vibrant crowns of her mother’s sunflowers can be seen poking up over the fence that surrounds the pool. When Lucy enters the house she smells fresh mint and roasting lamb, a smell that has always revolted her. Standing in the hallway she can hear arguing in the kitchen, her mother’s high cracking voice sporadically punctured by Grady’s profanity.

“And bullsh*t, Mom. This is bullsh*t!”

“I don’t care, Gray; I don’t want you driving that late at night. It’s no. The answer is just no.”
“Mom, this is historic. A dual concert in London and Philly.”

“Everything is historic once enough years pass. In ten years Live Aid will be just like any other concert.” She looks up at him through the skein of sweaty brown hairs that have escaped her loose ponytail as she’s been whisking a pan of gravy. Lamb fat splatters onto her sleeves, bare downy forearms, and on the Nikon that rests on the window sill above the stove.

“It’s for charity. Don’t you always talk about the kids starving in Ethiopia?”

“That’s not a joke. Or a reason to let you go to a concert, drive around with your friends, smoke whatever, drink whatever. I can’t think about it, Gray.” She wipes her thick brow with the back of her hand, leaving behind a daub of gravy. “No.”

“Mom, you gotta chill. Let go, just let go.”

“Gray, take a breath. You know if you put half this energy into your college applications you’d be set.”

“Oh Christ, not again with this shit, Mom.” Amelia looks up to see her husband and daughter framed in the kitchen doorway.

“Watch your mouth; your sister just came in. Oh Lucy, what did you do to that dress? You’re filthy!” Now she wipes her hands on her stained apron and switches the stove off, moving the gravy pan swiftly to a cold back burner. She moves to crouch before her daughter. “Jesus Christ, Daniel, she’s soaked. And my
god she’s wet herself! Honestly, you couldn’t stop somewhere and let her pee?
She’s six goddamn years old.”

“Oh, yes, this from the perfect mother. So nurturing, aren’t we now?
You’re no better than me, you know. You’re no better.”

Amelia shoots up and glares at him, “Does everything have to collapse
into everything else all the time with you? That’s not appropriate.”

“Oh, God forbid. Let’s make sure we’re appropriate. Always appropriate, kids.”

“I’m getting hungry over here. Maybe you two could think of something
other than yourselves and each other for once. That’d be fantastic,” Grady says.

“Grady Oliver Rainey I told you to watch it. Go get your sister cleaned
up.” Amelia’s ash gray eyes are wet.

Grady stoops to hold his sister’s hand. “How’s my girl,” he asks as he
takes her from the kitchen Lucy hears the strains of Who are you, who who, who
who coming from Grady’s room as they mount the carpeted stairway. They pass
his open door and from her high throne she can see the records scattered across
the desk, the full ashtray by the side of the rumpled bed. She knows he
accidentally upset it as he rose this morning, fumbling like a bear, because a
trajectory of ash and a few crushed butts has been flung and left, angled toward
his Martin guitar in the corner.
In the bathroom he gently bends to help her undress. “Goose, your knees are bleeding. You okay? You gotta stop picking those scabs. Of course, it would help if you weren’t such a klutz in the first place.”

“Grady!”

“I’m teasing you, relax. Loosen up, Goose. Lucy Goosey.”

Lucy is suddenly embarrassed about wetting herself. “I tried to hold it,” she says as her brother peels off her tights.

“What, this? Please! Don’t worry about this, Lu, happens to the best of us. Don’t you know Keith Richards pisses himself nightly?”

“Is he in your class?”

Grady pauses, looking into his sister’s eyes. “Why do you break my heart like that?”

Lucy giggles.

“Tell me you really do know who Keith Richards is, please.”

“Why does he pee all the time?”

“Classic avoidance. Him and you.”

“He’s in that tongue band.”

“Ah yes! That tongue band. Fair enough, Young Skywalker.”

“Grady don’t call me that! He’s a boy.”

“Who do you want to be?”

She pauses to think about it.
“Goosey?”

“No!”


In Lucy’s bedroom her brother brings a soft t shirt over her head, pulling her hair out from under the collar with care, combing it with his fingers. She balances on one foot at a time, holding onto his shoulders as he bends to help her into clean jeans, zipping and buttoning them for her. She could do all this herself. But she doesn’t want to. Downstairs their parents fight, and the lamb gets burnt.
Two

Lucy awakens to the still of the hot July morning. Her strawberry spotted sheets are tangled in her bare legs; her red quilt has been kicked to the bottom of the bed. Through the open window sails *come here, Uncle John’s Band, by the riverside* and she smells lemons. Then she’s up like a shot, wriggling into her blue bathing suit. She careens down the stairs and through the kitchen banging out the screen door onto the patio. Grady is standing there, shirtless and barefoot on the uneven stones, half a lemon in his hand. He squeezes its tough hide and rubs the juice into his scalp, heaving himself onto a grimy plastic lounge chair. He pulls his sunglasses down, smiling at his sister. “Lucy-Goosey! You slept in. Later than me.”

Lucy gestures to the mangled lemon he’s tossed into the hyacinth lining the patio. “Gimme one. I want one.”

“You’ve got two legs. There’s more in the fridge. What do you want it for anyway; you’re practically an albino,” Grady calls after her.

“I wanna eat it,” she giggles back from the kitchen.

“Lucy, don’t waste food. You’re not going to eat a lemon, truly. Put it back,” injects their mother as she sweeps into the kitchen, camera slung around her neck. “I have enough trouble trying to keep your brother from using them as hair dye—which is not working,” she says, moving to peer through a ragged hole in the screen door at her son, “You look like Raggedy Andy, God love you.”
Grady first tried lightening his hair with lemons after he and his friend Jeremy had gotten high as a fucking kite together. They were lying side by side on the cold concrete of the Rainey basement, flanked on either side by enormous bags of topsoil. It was dark except for a single flame that shot up and disappeared as Grady flicked the top on and off his zippo. They were listening to Pink Floyd. Grady told Jeremy that he pictured himself on a stage with his guitar, blinded by bright white lights high above his head, so high he couldn’t conceive of their origin. The crowd would be screaming, a gritty rush of pure noise. He could smell ripe air, feel its heat pressing against him like another body. And his hair—envied by his band mates, trailed by myriad long fingernails in every color of the rainbow—his hair would be even whiter than the lights.

“Dude, lemon juice,” came the sage reply.

The dried out mess on Grady’s real head remained an aberrant orange no matter how many of his mother’s lemons he wasted. The orange seemed to beget his temper, beget the tip of the cigarette forever in his mouth, beget the tone of his acne cream.

“Ma, can you lay off me for one second,” Grady says, shielding his eyes from the sun and looking toward the sound of her voice.

“Oh you’ve got it so rough, honey,” Amelia smiles. She steps briskly out onto the patio followed by her daughter, who is clutching a lemon. Amelia sits hunched on the edge of Grady’s lounge chair, legs pressed together in her knee-
length shorts, tickling her son’s shoulder with a cold hand.

Grady leans forward in the chair, the last bits of his baby fat gathering into creases across his middle. He scratches the sparse hair on his chest. “Ma, c’mon-”

_Click._ He is caught. “Gotcha!” Amelia says, letting the camera fall on its strap and smack her lean chest. These were her first loves; the split second expressions of her children. Her first real, searing, unbearable loves.

“Lu, put on your brother’s sunglasses.”

“These are Wayfarers, Mom,” Grady protests “she can’t wear these. Do you know how much these cost?”

“Relax, Gray. She’ll be careful.”

“Yeah, I won’t break them! Gimme.” Lucy’s hand shoots out to grab them and Grady angles his body away. _Click._ The camera captures just his back this time, brilliant orange hairs pricking out upon his neck, crescents of flowering bushes visible through the crooks in his arms, below them fringes of soil and stone. Caught.

“Ma, would you stop, please? That wasn’t even a good one.”

“We’ll just have to see how it comes out, won’t we?”

“Mommy, get me. Get me, Mommy!” Lucy leaps into frame next to her brother’s chair, throwing her arms around his warm neck and pressing her cheek to his as hard as she can, so hard she whitens the flesh on both their faces where
they connect. Grady’s wince is also a smile. *Click.*

Beyond them, from woods surrounding the house comes the staccato *chop* *chop* *chop* of an axe. Early that morning Daniel Rainey hadn’t been able to sleep, and at 4:00 am had instead taken up his axe and stalked into the thicket. Firewood could be gathered now, summer was ending. Before they knew it, when none of the others were even paying attention, it would be winter. Someone had to anticipate these things. Someone had to take action against the brutality of the insufferable cold, and he was the one to do it. He was always the one.

When he’d started at Solomon Brothers as a financial analyst he’d needed to work fourteen hour days, sometimes being called in at three in the morning. The phone in their little apartment would ring and Amelia would white knuckle her pillow and cry out as the shrill sound ripped into the silence of their sleep. Grady would wake up then, as startled by the telephone as by his mother’s scream. From birth he had been a high strung baby, crying for hours at a time, impossible to soothe unless he was suckling. A week after the nighttime calls began Amelia’s nipples were chapped and bleeding. Daniel resolved to unplug the telephone at night, simply rising at 3:00 am every morning. And anyway he’d been awake; feeling the starch of the sheets could skin him. His eyes were wide in the dark. There was a constant throb in his temples and he’d have to work hard to steady his breathing, to suppress the pressure of joy.

By 4:30 he’d enter the tall skinny Solomon Brothers’ building across from the
Stock Exchange whose inside felt as cramped as a drinking straw. Long tables studded with computers filled the narrow room. Daniel would squat just over his chair, looking at the neon green numbers filling the curved screen, the blinking green rectangles marking unfinished thoughts. Gathered around his computer was a scattering of papers and crumpled coffee cups, balled napkins close and warm as an embrace. Just minutes before his colleagues would begin to arrive Daniel’s wrist watch alarm would sound to let him know he needed to sweep his mess into his briefcase and snap it shut until the next morning. Before then though, huddled in his mountain of garbage and numbers, Daniel wouldn’t even notice the sun coming up.

Now in the woods he feels the same constancy. With a few brief respites for Luckys and sips from his father’s WWII canteen he is still assaulting the trees, a great pile of wood heaped into a pyramid beside him. His arms throb; his thighs burn each time he braces himself to swing. It feels so good, the stillness. Thank God for the ache of the stillness. Daniel feels cradled by the pounding sensation of his every limb, by the strong pulse of blood shuddering at his temples. He’d barely noticed the gradual swelling of the heat. As the sun had risen, the trees had sheltered him. Now though, as he gives in to fatigue, Daniel is aware of sweat drenching his clothes, and he must remove them.

A creek rushes in the shallow ravine behind him and Daniel peels off his shirt, his pants and underwear drop in folds at his ankles and he kicks them off.
Naked, he picks his way across the mossy rocks and damp red sand that slope down into the creek. Long-legged bugs skitter on the water, foam gathers around the stones that poke above its surface. He scoops up water and wets his face, again and again splashes his arms, his neck, his chest and back and shoulders. Through the silence he hears the voices of his family sailing over the trees. They’d been laughing, lounging in the sun all morning, while he’d had his fucking nose to the grindstone just like always. And when this very wood kept them warm a few months from now, while the blistering wind battered the windows of the great house, would they even turn their toasty faces to him to say thank you? Hah! They would not. Daniel begins to shiver, remembering that he hates the feel of pulling clothes onto a wet body. He stumbles out of the water and wriggles awkwardly into his briefs, clutching the rest of his clothes under one arm as he bends his head to light a cigarette. He slips on his work boots but leaves them untied, enjoying the awkward gait they now require. He ambles up the slope of the lawn, the cluster of his family gradually coming into view above him. They are huddled together on one lounge chair, under the silver white gleam of the sun, his wife photographing his clowning children.

Grady is the first to see the figure of his father in wet underwear trudging toward them. The canteen swings on Daniel’s neck and the axe is at rest in one hand, his rumpled clothes gripped in the other. A cigarette burns down in his grimacing mouth. His son grins dryly and reaches down to turn up the boom box
next to his chair *drivin’ that train, high on cocaine* Amelia turns around then, throwing her camera down on the chair when she sees her husband approaching.

“Son of a bitch, Daniel! Where are your clothes? Your daughter is right here!”

“Observational skills, my dear. Observe!” He says around his cigarette, shaking the balled pile of clothes in his fist.

“Get inside this instant, you are scarring your children by the second you goddamn lunatic!”

“Lunacy is relative, darling. What you see before you is nothing but the human form, subject to any sick interpretation you are willing to apply to it.”

Grady turns the volume dial up again. *Casey Jones you better watch your speed*

Amelia lunges toward her husband and he drops the axe and the clothes, throwing his hands up in front of his face. As Daniel’s mouth opens in protest, the cigarette falls through the air. Lucy picks up her mother’s camera and points it at the tangle of her parents. *Click.* Caught.
Amelia has been trying to make her exit for an hour. This happens with every visit, the restlessness and the guilt pressing upon her each in their turn. It’s the time when she begins circling the room with fluttering gestures, brushing the crumbs from the coffee table, stacking the magazines more neatly, fluffing the throw pillows and refolding the afghan draped over the couch. Her father coos at her when he notices, wanting her to sit and rest. He would like her to relent, to sink in to the thick air of sorrow that is second nature to him.

“Sweetheart, you have to walk for your graduation. We’re not going to upset your mother.” Amelia’s father squeezes her shoulder. She looks across the dim room at the figure on the couch. Her mother, Dorie is staring at the television, her hands awkwardly clutching at her knees. Amelia jerks away from her father and moves toward the window.

“Why is it always so dark in here,” she asks, pulling aside the heavy gold curtain, only to discover the mild light of evening outside. “Jesus you lose time in this place. Coming here makes me feel like I’m…” she trails off and flits around the room, switching on all the lamps. She avoids her father’s eyes when her mother absently wipes the drool from her chin with the back of a shaking hand.

“Would you look at that,” Dorie whispers. “Would you look at that
Both Amelia and her father turn toward the television now, watching the lush landscape of Vietnam skim across the screen as bombs fall onto it, and Walter Cronkite narrates. *Cut.* A group of smiling soldiers swing their legs over the side of an open truck bed; eyes sweetly wicked, almost like they’ve hijacked an ice cream truck, the filth on their faces merely from the ball field. *Cut.* A wide Saigon street full of bicycles and lined with wooden storefronts. *Cut.* A dead dog. *Cut.* A soldier kneels in front of a Vietnamese boy, gives him a high five.

“They’re so young,” Dorie’s eye’s focus on her husband, “See how young they are, Jack?”

“Yeah, I see, baby.” Amelia’s father turns away from his wife again, “So, honey, you’re going to walk, right? I want to see my little girl in a cap and gown.”

Amelia sits next to her mother, eyes still on the television, “It’s St. Raphael’s nursing school, Dad. Not Harvard. Let’s not make a big thing out of it, okay?”

“It is big. Amelia, it’s big.” Jack lowers his voice, “Now listen to me, if you’re worried about your mother, don’t be. There will be a big crowd there and if things start to get a little weird we’ll just, well, things won’t. I’ll take care of it.”

“Dad, Please. I told you what I want now just listen!” Amelia feels the
heat go from her chest up into her face as her voice rises. Next to her, Dorie’s body tenses up; she begins rubbing her legs.

In response Jack kneels down by his wife, placing his hands over hers and they go still. When he looks at his daughter his eyes are tired, “Think it over. Just think about it, please Amelia,” he says in a quiet voice. Dorie’s breath quivers and suddenly she inhales; a sharp sound, and she coughs. “Why won’t you just do like your father says,” she asks, seeming like herself for just a moment before she bites her lip and tears begin to fall.

Amelia shoots up from the couch. “I’ve got a shift at the hospital. I have to get back to the dorm and change.”

Her father is still bent by her mother, their heads resting upon one another like birds in a nest.

“Be careful,” Jack tells his daughter.

“I’m always careful, Dad.”

Amelia shuts the front door of her parent’s house quietly behind her.

Driving to St. Raphael’s she thinks about what it means for her to be where she is, in a position to make so many mistakes. Medicine, so sure of itself moment to moment, is often so wrong once the moment has passed. Still, as many mistakes are caught as made by medicine, and she can’t deny the feeling of making someone better. Saying goodbye as they leave the sickbed, the relief of the near misses. Of course, there are always more sick people. Each triumph is like the
first movement in a piece of music, and coming to the bridge Amelia often loses her confidence and finds it again in one breath. But that is getting better. Her internship is comprised of two week rotations in each specialty, and thus far the ER rotation has been the one she has loved most. If only there were never any mistakes. How many times in her life had she thought this?

Amelia thinks about her mother, who she was before that day in 1952 when she became someone else; often forgetting to put the coffee grinds in the percolator, or watching the leaves slowly yellow on the spider plant and remarking, “This plants needs water!” She’d click her tongue and cradle a droopy leaf in her hand, but she’d never get the watering can.

Dorie was a large woman with strong arms and a solid waist. She had named her daughter for her heroine, Amelia Earhart. As a teenager during the depression she collected every magazine article that made mention of Lady Lindy, in a darkened theatre with wet lips and hands clenched on the seat in front of her she drank in the news reels of the fierce flyer, this slippery free creature who would not be conquered. Earhart’s smile was always so practiced and composed; she never looked afraid, she never threw her head back in laughter. It was as if she was saying, “Of course you all love me. This is a power only I know, and why should that scare me?” Dorie coveted those detached eyes.

“Amelia, I see that strength in you. Just remember, you need no one. No man is an island, but a woman can choose to be one.”
Amelia was six on the hot August day in 1950 when her mother was arrested for indecent exposure in the grocery store in their hometown of Chatham, Ohio. In Amelia’s memory the air was thick, and her mother’s voice wavered and her bottle red hair was mashed to her head on one side. She had on huge plastic green hoop earrings and a red and white cinched-waist dress. Her stockings were torn just behind the knees on both sides, and she kept releasing the handle of the creaking grocery cart to reach down and finger each hole with a long flashing pink nail. “Never start wearing stockings, Amelia,” she kept saying to her daughter. They were standing in the Cereals and Breads when Dorie had suddenly had enough. She threw down the bag of dinner rolls she was holding and it hit the linoleum with a soft plunk. “That’s it. These fucking things are a torture chamber.” She turned her back to her daughter and kicked off her heels and they slid across the floor, stopping a few feet away from mother and daughter, and now people around them were frozen, watching. Dorie lifted up her dress and began struggling out of the skin tight nylons that squeezed her flesh. Her legs were several shades lighter than the fabric around them, pasty and dimpled with fat, expanding slowly as she rolled the stockings down. She had nothing on underneath, and Amelia remembers the vulnerability of her mother’s naked backside, the way the skin sagged, the little dark bruise on it, the red angry nail marks left behind from Dorie’s disrobing. The skirt of her dress was bunched up in her arms and she cradled its folds like a baby, swaying naked from the waist
down, “That’s better. Now that’s much better.” She said with a smile.

Amelia had only been twice to the hospital, Athens Lunatic Asylum, where her mother was taken after that day in the grocery store. The first time was in October, two months into her mother’s two year stay, for her birthday. Amelia brought a pot of yellow chrysanthemums that she wanted her mother to put in the window of her room, only to find that her mother had no room of her own, and no windows that weren’t shielded by dirty metal grating.

But for the lack of the sun, the little girl kept thinking it was like they were outdoors because of the crowds, the echo of the voices, the sour smells. She was too afraid to look at the faces of the people in paper gowns, so she looked instead their feet, and their identical paper slippers looked clean, simple in the weak light. She focused on them, and not on the nurse who came in with a little paper cup in her gloved hand and said to Dorie, “Time for your Thorazine, Mrs. Perrin. Her father’s hand squeezed hers then, and her mother winced in her metal folding chair as she gulped down the pills in the cup, shushing her paper slippers on the floor while her daughter watched.

In the parking lot, as he hurried her toward the car Amelia’s father said, “I shouldn’t have taken you there. That was wrong, but your mother wanted to see you so badly.” Jack Perrin was a tall lanky man who walked with strong strides and had a voice that vibrated down through his whole torso as he spoke. Amelia always felt safe with him, even when he cried, which was more and more often
these days with just the two of them and Ruby, the widowed neighbor, at home. Her father paused with key in hand when they reached the black Cadillac. “Your mother loves you so much, you know. She can’t help the way she is. She loves both of us very much. And I don’t want you to worry, she’s here to get better and then she’ll come home. She’ll be home soon.” His face was in shadow under his hat.

And then when Amelia’s mother had been in Athens for nearly two years, her father came home from a visit saying the time had come. He was wringing his hands and squeezing Amelia’s shoulders and talking about how a famous doctor was going to pay a visit to the hospital, how Mommy was going to be all better because Dr. Freeman knew how to fix brains that were broken. He had been travelling the country for several years performing in hospitals and homes. He was a miracle worker.

After the procedure Dorie was allowed to come home and recover. Her face was swollen and her head was shaved in front; she had two black eyes. Amelia thought maybe the doctor had beaten her until she promised to be a good mother, a good wife. Until she promised to get out of bed and go through the motions; he must have, because that’s just what she did. But sometimes her grocery lists would trail off into scribble, and sometimes the dishes would be washed and not rinsed, and the sharp taste of soap would curl Amelia’s tongue on a fork or a spoon. And sometimes her mother would smile at her with eyes that
bulged and the little girl would think *who is this woman*? Dorie stopped talking about Amelia Earhart. But she was home.

When Amelia had been accepted to nursing school in Connecticut two years earlier, her parents had moved to a suburb near New Haven to be with her. Now that she was graduating she wanted to go away, but when she visited her parents every Sunday a familiar feeling followed her there. There was something defeatist in it, but yet something simple, that let her off the hook. She couldn’t leave her father, not with her mother this way. But she knew there would be no change. She would have to stay in this place she knew, doing just what she had learned; just the way she’d been learning it. She wouldn’t have to make any decisions after that, this one choice was sufficient. It was simple. And it wasn’t new; anyway, she knew she’d be staying from the day her parents settled on the house ten minutes away from her school. That was why, thinking back, she’d bought the camera with her first two paychecks as an intern. She took pictures early in the morning, and they weren’t really anything special, but nursing had turned her sleep schedule upside down, and sometimes it was just nice to feel a sense of routine. Waking up early and shooting gave her that.

Before there was light, before there was color in the sky save for a deep indigo, she was outdoors, trudging and shooting. She felt like a hunter, her grandfather, with his exotic prey mounted high on wooden walls. These photos, though, she never mounted. They got stuffed in her desk drawer.
One Sunday she took the camera to her parents’ house. She told herself as she walked through the door that maybe she wouldn’t take it out of her bag, just tell them about it. Tell them she had a new hobby. But she did take the camera out and her father smiled, taking it from her and turning it around in his hands, opening the lens cap and handing it back to her, urging her to take a picture of her mother and him. And she did. She took a few. And when the telephone rang, and her father left the room, she took some of her mother. Pictures in parts. Hands. Nose. Part of an eye. Then a picture of her mother as a whole, shaded in darkness except for her face, whitewashed in television light. Amelia’s roommate saw the pictures of Dorie when she went looking through her desk drawer for a pen. “These are really good. I didn’t even know you took pictures.”

“That’s why I’ve been getting up so early.”

“Amelia, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I could sleep through an air raid. But anyway, you should send these somewhere, do something with them. Who is it? In the pictures, I mean.”

“Just this woman I know.”

For the past year Dorie had received electroshock therapy once every two months. It was hard to tell whether it helped, but her mother seemed to know when it was time to go in for her appointments, because she would lock herself in the bathroom. Jack eventually removed the knob.
Lucy can hear her father’s heavy breath, his conspiratorial whispers to Grady behind the couch in the den, muffled fumbling. An afternoon sun pierces through the French patio doors behind Daniel, and from his crouched position on the floor, hands covered in wool, he sweats. It’s been a brutal August. He smiles at his red-faced son. Grady, pulling a sock over his own hand, nods back at his father in acknowledgment. Ready.

“Oh, you got her, Grady, they’re open!” Amelia smiles; pulling her daughter’s body closer and resting her chin on the child’s hair. She squints and tilts her head, trying to avoid the direct sunlight.

Reluctantly the little girl brings her moist palms to her eyes. “Okay, Daddy. Ready.” “Hurry up!”
“Alright kid, hold your horses!” Grady shouts back.

Suddenly Daniel’s hand emerges above the couch. A hastily drawn face bleeds into the worn fabric of the old sock covering his fingers.

Affecting a cracking falsetto, Daniel begins his story. “I, Little Red Riding Hood, must bring these fresh cookies to my grandma. She is very sick.”

The sock puppet begins to hum a tune and skip across the top of the couch, abruptly cut off by the Big Bad Wolf—Grady’s hand shrouded in a more menacing sock—complete with jagged teeth and furrowed brows.

“Where are you going, my dear, in such a hurry?” Grady Wolf growls.

“Are you deaf, Wolf? I’m going to see my grandma!”

“Daddy sounds so funny!” Lucy whispers to her mother in delight.

“Your daddy knows how to put on a show.” Amelia replies.

“I do too!” The little girl tilts her head, peering up at her mother. Dust motes tumble around Amelia’s face, suspended in beams of light.

Lucy begins calling out, “My turn! I want a turn! I can do it too!”

Grady’s head pops up. “Goose,” he whispers in mock offense, “The show’s not over yet. Be cool.”

Lucy hesitates, and then settles back into Amelia’s lap as the show goes on. Her mother places a cool hand on Lucy’s shoulder and brushes her lips on the girl’s ear. Amelia’s breath is bitter, as if she has bitten into a pill one is meant to swallow.
When the men come to the climax of their show, the scene in which the
wolf is to be split open by the woodsman’s axe, Daniel cries out, “I can’t do it! I
can’t kill this wolf. This wolf is DUN DUN DUUUUUN…my son!”


“It’s not your fault you ate Grandma, Son. You’re merely the product of a
broken home. But now I can make it right.” Daniel’s woodsman sock claps
Grady Wolf on the back. “Now let’s go home for some nice hot cocoa.”

Amelia emits a sharp laugh. Lucy feels it vibrate through her neck, down
into her chest. Her mother’s heart beat flutters lightly against her back; something
has been released. Amelia’s fingers skitter across her daughter’s shoulders and
clench on the tiny arms.

“What about my Grandma?” Daniel’s other red hooded hand asks
sheepishly.

“Them’s the breaks, kid.” Grady Wolf answers.

And now it’s over. Grady and Daniel stand up and walk around the couch
to bow before their audience. The tops of their heads are so close Lucy can smell
the stale cigarettes, the pomade they’ve both used.

“You’ve got to quit smoking, both of you.” Amelia says. Her eyes lock
with Daniel’s for a moment; then break away as their daughter begins to squirm
again.

“Can’t I have a turn now? I can put on a show too.”
“Get on up there, then!” Daniel smiles at her.

“What are you going to do, Goose?” Grady asks.

“You have to announce me, Grady.”

“Sure thing. But you have to tell me what you’re going to do.”

“Sing!”

“Of course, of course! And now, lady and gentlemen, for your listening pleasure the dulcet vocal stylings of Lucy Goosey—

“Hey!”

“I mean, Lucy Rainey!”

The little girl clambers out of her mother’s lap and circles the couch, her fine white ponytail swinging wildly behind her. Her head is only visible from the neck up behind the couch and she stands on tip toes, jutting her chin, noticing that she can see the reflections of her seated family from the huge wooden framed television on the floor behind them. She can’t clearly see her own face in the black bulge of the screen, but when she moves, it moves too, and so she knows it’s there.

“Can you see me? Can you see me?” She asks, eager and frustrated.

“We can see you. What are you going to sing?” Amelia smiles.

In response the little girl launches into it, “No one knows what it’s like, to be the bad man, to be the sad man, behind blue eyes!” Lucy throws her arms out on either side of her, and her family can see them only from the forearms up. She
begins shaking her hands for effect, more and more conscious of the worry that
she can’t really be seen. “But my dreams they aren’t as empty, as my conscience
seems to be, I have hours, only lonely, my love is vengeance that's never free! No
one knows what’s it’s like to feel these feelings, like I do and I blame YOU!”
Here she points at them, still shaky on tip toes and pauses. “That’s all the words I
know.” She states calmly. She walks around the couch and bows.

“Goose!” Grady cries clapping his hands above his head, “The Who! This
is such a proud day for me.”

“Where did she learn all those lyrics?” Amelia asks her husband.

“Like sponges, they are. Just like sponges.” He answers, his eyes
searching his daughters’ face as if he’ll find there the thought he’s trying to grasp.

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At the dinner table that evening Lucy feels a tingling inside her, happiness
she doesn’t know what to do with. She chews and sucks the ends of her hair. She
bangs her heels against the front legs of her chair.

“Stop that, honey.” Her mother places a hand on Lucy’s knee to still her.

“So that was a good idea, that puppet show.” Amelia smiles at her son.

“Spur of the moment thing, Mom.”

“Too damn hot to do anything else.” Daniel nods. “Besides, I love making
my girls smile.”
“I liked your voice, Daddy.” Lucy smiles and pushes a mouthful of mashed potatoes through her teeth with her tongue.

Amelia holds Lucy’s face firmly in one hand and swipes a napkin across the girl’s mouth with the other.

“Thanks, Sweetie,” Daniel smiles at his daughter. “Your brother wasn’t too bad, either. You’ll have to remember to pack that charisma when you head out to New York, Gray.”

Amelia looks up from her plate, tightening a fist around her napkin. “New York?”

“Well, I’ve been writing some stuff. Songs. I’m thinking once I graduate next year I’m going to New York. Maybe play in a few bars or something.”

“You’ve got it all figured out then.” Amelia answers, looking at the wall behind him where a baseball had once chipped the paint. It must’ve happened when Grady was Lucy’s age.

“You know, he’s thought this through.” Daniel says, squeezing his son’s shoulder.

“I’m sure he has.” Amelia answers in a near whisper. Why had they never fixed the paint back there? Hadn’t they had countless dinners with company? People must’ve noticed it over the years. They’d had so much time to paint over it. There was no excuse.
Grady eyes his lap and listens as his mother’s voice grows quieter with each reply she makes, drawing her further from the room, making her pale skin, her gray eyes and tight lips things that are there and not there at once.

“It’ll be okay, Mom. I know what I’m doing.”

She looks at him now, taking this one last chance to reach him from wherever she’s gone. “Grady, there are things you need to know. There hasn’t been enough time. I’m not prepared for this. I’m not prepared.”

“But this isn’t about you.” Grady’s cracking voice startles Lucy and she clenches her eyes shut. Beyond the dark of her lids the room is silent. When she opens her eyes again she sees her brother hanging his head, her mother’s fingers over her lips, her father’s palm on Grady’s neck, gently moving.

“You know how to write songs?” she asks.

Grady looks up at his sister and it’s a punch in her stomach because he is crying.

“Lucy, let’s go take a bath.” Her mother doesn’t look away from Grady as she takes her daughter’s hand and rises from the table.

Upstairs Lucy sings over the rush of the water filling the tub in the stark white bathroom. “No one bites back as hard, on their anger, none of my pain and woe, can show through!”

“Quiet.” Amelia says.
When the little girl climbs into the bath she tells her mother the water is too cold. “It’s hot out,” Perrin replies, “This will rejuvenate you.” Amelia ties back her hair, rolls up her sleeves and crouches down, scrubbing her daughter’s back roughly with a thin washcloth. Beads of sweat form on her downy upper lip and she wipes them away. Amelia lifts the small arms quickly and cleanses the girl’s sides; Usually Lucy laughs here, and Amelia assumes the role of tickle monster, running lightly scampering nails up and down her daughter’s small hunched frame. Today Lucy tightens her body. It still tickles, but now the feeling is a foreign one, one that doesn’t give her the urge to laugh.

In bed the child’s skin is buzzing and red from the too cold water, the too rough washing. It didn’t hurt, Lucy keeps reasoning, so why does she feel this way? Restless. She hears the guitar in her brother’s room, hears his raspy voice, “Down by the river, I shot my baby.” He spits out the word “shot.” It’s not a song her brother wrote. Lucy thinks the man who wrote the song sounds like a woman. His high warble is full of bottomless sorrow that makes her uneasy. She creeps from her bed and enters the bathroom that connects her room to Grady’s. She can hear him better now, and she slides down against the wall to sit with her head rested against it. The tile is cool under her bare feet though there’s no breeze through the open window.

In her parents room Amelia’s back is to Daniel in bed. He’s sitting up, reading Alexander Pope in a whisper. He likes to hear poetry in his own voice.
He puts his hand on his wife’s shoulder and she shrinks away from his touch.

“Everything okay, Millie? Don’t worry about the kid, Baby. He’s got to grow up. And we still have Lucy.”

“Grady is going to college,” she says. *And when he does, I’m leaving you.*
1966

Five

Amelia awakens amazed. She’d slept past dawn. She had taken no pictures. She sees that her roommate’s bed is empty, her robe missing from the hook on the door. She thinks about the night she’s just spent, with a man who is virtually a stranger to her. She runs her fingers across her sore lips, swollen from kissing, the boundary where they meet her fair skin blurred. She thinks about how fast he drove, and how she’d always despised fast drivers. But somehow he was so solid, so sure of himself, he seemed invincible. He’d bathed her in praise, talked to her the way no man ever had. About sex, about her body, about what they could do, someday. She still couldn’t figure how it was he could say those things to her and she wasn’t brought to a place of rage. She wasn’t ashamed, or even shocked. She was alive. It occurs to her, lying in bed, that he came to her and struck a match, and she was alive now.

He is intoxicating, she thinks. And it’s not at all like her to get carried away. She’s used to holding herself in, struggling against any impulse she may have toward expansion. She suddenly doesn’t want to be buttoned up. She suddenly doesn’t want to step away from this new corridor, she wants instead to fling herself down into it, deeper until she can look back and see nothing but a pin prick hole of light behind her; her life. Her life before Daniel. If only she’d known, going into the hospital that morning. Or was it better that she hadn’t
known? Did that somehow strengthen the witch craft?

When Amelia first entered the room she hadn’t noticed him. It was hard to believe that now, that it would have been possible for anyone to miss Daniel Rainey, even in the corner of a hospital room, while his brother’s labored breathing took front and center, and his mother’s fear-addled voice proclaimed over and over that he should be all over this by now.

“How long can this go on? 22 years we’ve been battling this thing. 22 years! Do you hear what I’m saying?” Clara was screaming at the doctor, “Are you even 22 years old?”

The young resident looked up at her, “Ma’am, you’re worried about your son, I know. But don’t be. Treatments for this sort of thing are more effective now. A steroid drip was hooked up to Matthew’s arm, as Amelia stood and watched in the doorway. The needles were nothing; she’d never had a problem with them, but that breathing. When a patient breathed like that she was thrown into a state of utter panic. Matthew sat up in the bed, still in his regular clothes, drops of saliva drying on the front of his t shirt, his long hair darker than the bushy beard that hid most of his face. His eyes were bleary, faraway. Amelia knew emasculation. All nurses knew it when they saw it. You had to earn not to react to it, not to balk at it or turn away, not to comfort or cajole. Just keep your voice as even as your eyes and you’ll be fine. That’s all. That’s a pain you can’t take away.
St. Raphael’s had sectioned off a wing of the hospital for returning vets. Amelia had to go on rounds with the interns when she’d first begun her program. She didn’t know the look of loss then, she didn’t connect that a foot blown off, or the loss of some fingers, or shrapnel lodged in the skull could produce a look like that. The look of a man whose essence is leaking out through his wounds. She hated that her presence evoked such pain, that just by being there, and being a woman, she caused a little death each time. Matthew looked that way now, with her in the doorway, and turned away when the doctor waved her in.

“Nurse, patient presenting with Post-Polio-Syndrome, brought on gradually by the initial onset of the disease in 1944, when the patient was four years old.”

Daniel stood up then, and the slats of sunlight pushing through the blinds flickered across his face then disappeared as he moved toward Matthew’s bed.

“I got off easy,” he said with a pained expression, and their mother’s face flushed.

“Oh stop it, everything’s fine,” she waved her arm at him and her wooden bangle bracelets clacked together and slid down to her elbow.

“You’re a good brother.” Matthew spoke through wheezes, and Amelia noted the way his neck shivered, as if his voice were being squeezed up from his gut, coursing up his throat with a steady rhythm like pumping blood.

“He trained his neck muscles to help him breathe,” Daniel explained.
“I’m like a circus act,” Matthew added.

“I think it’s amazing,” Amelia looked at his neck again, the splotches of red, like tiny hand prints, that had sprung up during his fit, were fading away.

“My sons are good boys, “Clara smiled, “Daniel’s transferring to Georgetown next Fall, going to be a priest. Smart men, I raised.”

Daniel looked at Amelia and smiled, his hair falling in front of his black eyes, lips pulling against white teeth in a way that had her just think, “Perfect.”

“Pretty impressive,” she smiled back, “And you seem to be doing better,” she said, turning to Matthew, “You lie down and these two can take their time visiting. I’ll be back in a bit to check in. Ring the desk if you need anything.”

She felt Daniel’s eyes following her as she left, and when she made her way to the cafeteria and through the lunch line, she saw him sitting alone at the corner of one of the large tables, staring at her through the steam from his paper coffee cup. Something in his face made her impulsive. Something in his smile and the way he watched her. Something solid, something that circled around her and squeezed, something that only made room for the thoughts and intentions that were buried deep inside her. Daniel seemed to bring them out, and it was as if only he could see her. She thought again of Matthew’s throat. Maybe she could imagine that feeling now, of training one muscle to do the work of two, the feeling of a hopelessly idle and out of control organ, something you’d poke with a stick. She was no longer thought. In this moment she was instinct.
She moved to sit across from him and smiled. “Your brother should be just fine, you know. We’re not supposed to say, but, I think he’ll be okay.”

“He always seems to bounce back. It’s funny, somehow I’m the one who takes things harder. Not his illness, I mean, but he’s got this, lightness, I guess. Rolls with the punches.”

“And you?”

“Ha, I am the punches.”

“What does that mean?”

“Are you intrigued?”

“Nothing much intrigues a nurse, my friend. Especially not one with my mother.” Amelia looked alarmed suddenly, when she said this.

Daniel didn’t reply right away. He just smiled at her.

“Sorry, I just…”

“No apologies. You know, people tend to reveal themselves to me. I have that kind of a face,” Daniel shrugged. He didn’t really have that kind of face. His face was intense, his features sharp. There was a darkness in him that you could see right away, a depth to fall into, but also a buoying warmth, in a current that was never still for a moment.

“My mother’s had a lobotomy. It was sixteen years ago. But anyway, she wasn’t okay before then.”

Daniel just nodded.
“My name’s Amelia, by the way. Do people do that? Tell you deep dark secrets before they even introduce themselves?”

“I’ve got a secret. I haven’t yet told my mother I’m not going to be a priest.”

“Wow, that’s sort of a doozy.”

“Yes it is. See? Feel better?”

“Actually, not really,” but Amelia was smiling.

“Maybe you’ll have a drink with me when your shift is over, that should dull any residual woes.”

“I’m nineteen.”

“Why should that stop you? You’ll have no trouble if the bartender is a man.”

“Bars are a little too male for me, I think.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well then just come for a drive with me. I love to drive. You might even get a dinner out of the deal.”

“Really, well, what girl could turn down an offer like that?”

“Good,” his grin was unmistakable. He’d accomplished exactly what he’d set out to do, Amelia realized, but she didn’t mind it. She had the feeling he wasn’t a man who lost often. She wondered what he was like on the few
occasions when he did, if that was when the darkness took hold, that blackness, or whatever it was, as she carried her tray across the cafeteria. She looked down as she tipped it into the trashcan, suddenly realizing she hadn’t eaten a thing, and that she was throwing out her entire lunch, but was too late to stop herself.

Her roommate comes in then, quietly in case Amelia is still asleep, “It lives,” she cries, looking at Amelia.

“It certainly does.” Amelia replies, closing her eyes and pulling the covers up around her.
The turkey has just arrived, fresh in its brown paper. Daniel’s mother Clara bends to unwrap it and pinches the loose skin under its wing, inspecting it. She brings her fingers to her nose and smells them.

“It’s fresh?”

“It’s fresh.” Amelia heaves a bag of onions into the refrigerator, next to a large pumpkin that slumps onto its soft side. If the onions are ice cold she won’t cry when she slices into them.

“Maybe they tell you it’s fresh so they can charge more. It feels thawed out to me. The skin gets grainy when you thaw it out.” Clara stares across the kitchen, her eyes accusing the dual chrome sink, the hand-painted Venetian tiles that border the window sill above it.

“Why do you need everything so fancy? No wonder my son works all the time.”

“What if it is frozen? What then?”

“It’s no good being ripped off, Millie.”

“Not everything’s triage. It’s a turkey. We’re going to dress it and stuff it and roast it and make gravy from its fat and by the time we serve it tomorrow everyone will be shoveling it in so fast they won’t know if it’s been frozen or if it’s fresh or if it’s still alive.”
“Well you don’t have to bite my head off. I’m only trying to help.”

Amelia moves to switch on the cassette player wedged in the corner of the counter. Blue blue windows behind the stars yellow moon on the right big birds flying across the skies throwing shadows on our eyes leave us helpless She remembers going to the farm with Lucy to pick out the bird the month before.

“They’re just enormous, these birds.” Amelia had said; crouching to gaze into one of several steel mesh domes scattered throughout Judy Pike’s yard. Each rose two feet above the ground and housed six of the dead-eyed fowl. When it rained a vinyl tarp was tossed over each of the cages.

“They’ll only get bigger,” Judy rocked back on her heels. “We feed ‘em real good corn. You know Teddy down the road? It’s his corn. Know which one you want yet?”

“Lucy, why don’t you pick?”

The little girl had been finding loose feed scattered around the cages and pushing pieces of it through to the eager birds, who maneuvered themselves deftly in their small spaces to peck it up. She looked up at her mother and back at the turkeys, their white feathers seeming impossibly thick, luminous. The outer layer like scales. Lucy thought probably they can swim these birds, appropriate their wings into fins and glide through the water. She closed her eyes and pushed her finger through a diamond in the mesh, feeling the tickle of down. The softness reminded Lucy of her mother’s arm as the girl would reach up to hold onto it
whenever they were walking somewhere. Amelia never held her daughter’s hand.
She always walked stiffly, with quick clipped steps, just a few beats ahead of
whoever her companion was. Lucy often had to double her pace to keep up.
Amelia was always headed somewhere and Lucy was always hanging on, just a
bit behind.

The little girl opened her eyes. “This one. Now can we go get my
costume?”

“You still haven’t told me what you want to be.”

“Halloween,” Judy interjected, “I always forget about Halloween once all
of this turkey business gets under way.”

“Mommy, I want to be a fish. But I want to be one with floaty scales, sort
of long like, and soft. Do they have those?”

“I don’t know; we’ll have to look. I thought you were a cinch for Lois
Lane.”

“Nope. A fish. With floaty scales.”

The patio door rattles now and Daniel’s brother Matthew struggles inside,
his arms full of fire wood. The women can see the work he’s doing under the skin
on his neck, the ripples of breath that wrestle themselves around the thick cording
of his veins, the flesh on his face purple, patched with sickly white. He looks
down on the floor next to him and sees three logs in the cradle of hammered tin.
He suddenly straightens his arms and lets the wood clatter into the cradle with a
crash, upsetting the logs resting there, sending splinters of bark leaping up and onto the rug.

“Don’t overdo it.” Amelia starts at the sound, her hands clutching the counter. Her knees are dissolving she thinks.

“They were heavier than I thought, I guess. Sorry.” Matthew answers in his halting way, neck muscles undulating as if he is swallowing over and over.

“No, it’s just—it’s just the noise startled me is all. And I don’t know if you should be doing all that anyway.”

“Oh Millie, let my boy alone,” Clara says, opening the refrigerator to gather up a bunch of parsley. “Don’t you know men don’t like to be told what they can’t do? Swinging the axe could kill him and it doesn’t make a bit of difference. He’s a man.”

“I don’t know if it’s killing me but I love this!” Matthew says; pulling off the work gloves he borrowed from his brother finger by finger. “You have woods here. Something about chopping down a tree; something that’s been stuck in the ground for probably more years than you’ve been here. Well, maybe it is a male thing.” He laughs. In between the sounds there are flickers of wet breath.

“How come you talk like that?” Lucy asks from the doorway, still in the worn Care Bear nightgown she’d slept in, though the polyester was pilling and that made her itchy. She remembers that just the year before she had wondered the same thing about her uncle, too shy to articulate it. Instinct told her it was
wrong to ask things like that, but now she was old enough to know she could get
away with being young. She pads into the kitchen in her favorite slippers; Ernie’s
head on the right one and Bert’s on the left.

“Lucy.” Amelia says sharply, shooting up from the cabinet where she has
been rooting around, taking stock of her roasting pans.

Clara laughs, pulling the cutting board out from a drawer. “You let my
granddaughter ask anything she wants to. She’s only six for christssake. She
won’t have that freedom for much longer.”

Amelia turns to her mother-in-law and opens her mouth but Matt holds up
his hand, “Amelia I really don’t mind,” he says, turning to his niece. “Well kid, I
know your dad talks about how I was sick when I was little. I had this really bad
virus called Polio, made it so my lungs forgot how to breathe. When I started to
get better I had to learn to use my neck muscles to breathe.”

“Okay. But why do you talk like that?”

“Haven’t you ever noticed how much you breathe when you talk?”

“Am I going to get polio?”

“Lucy, you picked quite a turkey.” Clara smiles at the little girl, holding
up the dead bird’s wing and waving it at her.

Lucy stares wide-eyed and swallows hard. She feels sick thinking of the
downy body she’d touched through the cage, how it had reminded her of her
mother. That body was gone now, replaced by pimply moist flesh. Of course she
had known the bird they were choosing was one they would eat, she just hadn’t thought about how different it would look dead.

“It’s dead?” She asks, but yes, of course it is.

“You can’t eat it alive!” Clara exclaims. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“In some parts of Korea they eat live octopus. Live fish too. I forget the name of the fish. It’s a pretty big one though.” Matthew says.

“Isn’t that something?” Clara smiles widely at her oldest son.

Grady is heard stomping down the hall above them and then shuffling down the stairs. He bounds into the kitchen in striped athletic socks, basketballs shorts and a faded tee.

“Hey, nice bird, Loogie!”

“Gray, please don’t liken your sister to snot, and throw those in the wash now, we have company.” Amelia points to the filthy socks that sag shapelessly off the ends of her son’s toes, the cotton gritty and thin at their heels.

“Lay off your son,” Clara chides, “Boys are supposed to be filthy.”

Grady bends to kiss his grandmother’s cheek and she turns toward him in her chair and puts her hand over his.

“What’s the matter, Lu?” He asks his sister, seeing her ashen face.

“Nothing.” She answers quietly, thinking of forgetting how to breathe, of the puckered flesh of the turkey, the spot where its head used to be.
“Grady I hear you’re leaving us for New York next year. That ought to be some excitement, eh?” Matthew crosses the room to greet his nephew, clapping his shoulder with a breathy smile.

“Nothing is final.” Amelia has snatched the pumpkin from the refrigerator, and carefully begins thumbing the tender side, seeking the best spot to insert the knife and scoop out the rot.

Grady ignores his mother. “I’ve been getting the New York Times and looking for roommate shares in the village.”

“You might as well read the paper while you’re at it, Grady.” His grandmother tells him. Have you all been keeping up with the story on those hostages in the Middle East? What a sin that is.”

“Maybe Reagan’ll grow a pair.” Matthew sits at the table across from Clara.

“A pair of what?” Lucy asks, climbing up into his lap, running her fingers along his rippling neck.

“There are plenty of horrible things that go on everyday;” Amelia says as she guts the pumpkin, “Right here in this country too.”

“Mom, you think I’m stupid? You think I don’t get what you’re saying? New York is just like any other place, except it’s the only place for music. Grady begins to pick a pimple on his cheek, making it into a sore that spreads out red to his jawline.
“Millie, I’m going to tell you something because you need to hear it. The tighter you hold onto your kids the quicker they’ll slip away. You have to learn to let go. There’s no choice.”

“I’ll let go when he makes a practical decision about his life. And that he hasn’t done yet. He has not done that. Adults don’t up and go huge city they’ve never been to with no money and no job lined up to move into a ratty apartment with a complete stranger. Those are the plans of an adolescent. When my son is grown, I’ll let him go.” Amelia drags her hands across her jeans, smearing a trail of pumpkin seeds and membrane along her thighs.
1967

Seven

Amelia lets the door close quietly behind her. Her mother is sleeping on the couch, her head lolling to one side with the light from the television flashes across her face. Her father doesn't look up from where he's leaning forward in his chair, playing solitaire on the ottoman that's worn from his work shoes. The cards are faded in their corners in the shape of his thumbs.

Amelia can see his jaw working, "Well, say what you have to say, then," she tells him.

"I have nothing to say. You're an adult. I just don't see much point in coming for a visit so late, when we're about to go to bed."

"See? I'm sure you feel much better for getting that out. You been holding onto that one all day?"

"I'm holding onto nothing. Nothing, Amelia. You were supposed to be here hours ago."

"I am an adult, Dad. I am. And I can spend my time where I want."

"I see, so you don't want to spend your time with us. You've outgrown your family? That sounds like a terrible road to go down. And I suppose Daniel's got something to do with this?"

"If you mean was I with Daniel, then yes. I was."
"It's not healthy to let a relationship swallow up everything else in your life. This boy is sucking away every part of you that he can't have to himself. I don't like it, and I know what you're thinking, but this is not a father trying to keep his only daughter forever. Daniel isn't the one. It may be hard to hear, and it may fall on deaf ears, but he is not the one, Amelia."

"How do you know? You've barely given him a chance. You're condemning him for wanting to spend time with me? What should he want to do, Dad? Tell me, what would the one want to do? Hang out here? Jesus!"

"If you can't change your tone, you'll have to leave. Now."

Amelia looks at her sleeping mother, trying to quell the rage thrumming in her heart. Dorie could sleep through a hurricane on all those drugs. And Amelia hates it all. She always has, but she's never had anything else to run to. Now she wants to pass a hand in front of her face and let it fall away. She wants to drop into Daniel's life, blood into water, and become diluted, to no longer be able to distinguish herself from him. She doesn't want the taste, the scent, the feel and look of her life to show through. She'll become a wife. She'll be a mother. Untouchable, lost to the current of a man's world.

She breathes in, knowing it doesn't matter. None of this matters anymore. Someone has pricked a pin sized hole in the black and she can see her way clear. She has to make herself small to fit through, but once on the other side she’ll be a bullet, she’ll gain strength and size again. This, the dingy furniture and the faded
playing cards and the lost time, it’ll be washed down the tunnel behind her, molted and shed as she squeezes through that pin prick. She can see it.

“I’m sorry, Dad, that you’re upset. I’m sorry you’re hurt. I’m sorry I wasn’t here earlier, and that you depend on me. I think it humiliates you, Dad, to count on me the way you do.”

“Humiliates me? What are you talking about? Amelia, I love you. I want you here because I love you.”

“I know you do, and I know you think that’s the only reason you want me here. I believe that you think you’re being honest. But Dad, without me what are you? Are you the nurse? Are you the nurse to the woman you married? That may be the saddest thing I’ve ever heard. What kind of life is this?”

“Why are you talking this way? You don’t sound like yourself, Amelia. Is he feeding you this garbage? Is he? You tell me right now, he’s got you like a puppet, doesn’t he? A goddamn puppet!”

“Daniel’s got nothing to do with this?”

“Then what does this have to do with, Amelia, because I’m getting pretty sick of this conversation, I got to tell you.”

“This is about you, Dad, about you and me. Not Mom, not graduation, not Daniel, not me taking pictures. You and me. You cannot just expect me to live this life with you. You can’t ask me to do that. It’s not what you want, really, is it? It can’t be what you want for your daughter.”
“I want you, Amelia to have the life that’s right for you, and staying out every night, drinking, hanging around with a guy who’s going nowhere fast, is not it.”

“Nowhere fast? He’s going to fucking Georgetown!”

“Watch your mouth!”

Jack Perrin rarely yelled, and Amelia could probably count on one hand the number of times he’d yelled directly at her. Each time before, tears had immediately sprung from her eyes and she’d been short of breath, just to hear him raise his voice. This time she feels nothing. He is receding. All of it is getting further and further away. She looks behind him at her bleary-eyed mother, who’s been startled awake by their argument. Dorie smiled warmly at her. “We missed you, Dear Heart. But you’re here now. Here you are.” She closes her eyes again.

“She’s worse, isn’t she?” Amelia looks back at her father, and sees that this time, he is the one in tears.

“Not worse. This is what it is. This is just what it is. I just want you to have a good life. You can’t know yet, what all this feels like.”

“Oh but you’re determined I’ll know, Dad, aren’t you? You want to make damn sure I’ll know just what it’s like to watch things slide by you. It’s as if you’re living your life in a car, passing all the places where everyone else wants to linger. I don’t want that.”
“You can’t know,” Jack repeats softly. He reaches out to put a hand on her hair, to pull her to his chest, but somehow, in a way he’ll never be able to figure, she is out the front door before he has the chance.
Eight

Grady follows his father across the cemetery. He is hesitant; feeling the itch in the soles of his feet and his knees as he steps across the graves, imagining the bodies below him as if there are no coffins.

“Hurry up, Grady!” Daniel cups a hand around his mouth and shouts back to his son, anxious to get to the site of his own father’s resting place. Grady catches up to him and they stand before the plot, looking down at the bare lumpy earth with no headstone to mark it. Two great evergreens shade the spot and cast prickly shadows on Grady’s face, darkening his orange hair.

Daniel recites the Our Father, the Hail Mary. He pulls out his battered King James and begins to read The Binding of Isaac. Grady gazes out over the cemetery, the rows of headstones, the mausoleums, the holiday wreaths and potted poinsettias, the draped rosaries swinging back and forth in the icy wind. He looks down at the new grass poking through the unsettled earth of his grandfather’s two-year-old grave. Save for the two evergreens, there is no way to know which dead man is under there. Grady wants to know for certain that the presence he is sensing is his grandfather’s. The smell of his pipe. The feel of his rough wool sweater. The peace in his jaundiced eyes.

Daniel is still reading, “And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said: ’My father.’ And he said: ’Here am I, my son.’ And he said: ’Behold the fire
and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?’ And Abraham said:

‘God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’ So they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son—”

“I don’t understand it.” Grady’s voice collides with his father’s.

“This is a very moving passage, Grady. What’s not to understand? God is the true father. We are all his sons. I’ll always have a father, even though mine is gone. Can’t you see how that is a comfort to me?”

“I don’t get that God. And I don’t get that father either. It’s bullshit he’d do that to his son.”

“I guess faith could surprise someone who has none.”

“But there are levels. Can’t you have faith without killing your fucking son?” Grady’s hands shoot out in front of him.

“That’s not the point, Gray.”

“Then what is the point?”

“This passage is about loving God, being unselfish. These are things you know nothing about and it scares me. You’re spoiled rotten.” Daniel spat out. “I give you too much, that’s the problem. You’re an ingrate.”

Grady’s eyes narrow as he looks across the cemetery at his father’s Jeep.
“One of these days my dad will have a headstone.” Daniel whispers.

“Why doesn’t he have one right now?” Grady is still not looking at his father. His hands are stuffed into the pockets of his jeans and he is teetering back and forth in his Adidas. The breeze ripples his windbreaker and he pulls the hood onto his head, over his frozen ears.

“It’s important to be careful with words, always. Your words are what you leave behind.” Daniel places two cigarettes in his mouth and lights them both, handing one to his son and continuing, “It’s about honor too, saying the right thing. When you set something in stone you’ve leveled the words in a new way.” He cuts across the air with an even hand, “It’s final. When you speak your words float, it’s the obvious difference between stone and air. I know you’ll understand this son, because you have depth. I’ve always loved your depth, Gray.” He grazes his son’s arm with careful fingers, and the boy doesn’t move away.

The pair falls silent and smokes, Daniel looking at the ground and Grady watching him but pretending to study one of the trees. Quickly the boy pulls out his Swiss Army knife and stalks over to it.

“Where are you going?”

“Just over here, Dad. There’s something I want to do.” Grady crouches by the trunk and crushes his cigarette into it, tossing the butt aside. With his knife he begins carving into the thick grooves of the wood.
“Stop it, Gray. Where’s your reverence for the dead?”

“Chill out. Let me do this.” The boy turns to his father, putting up a hand to quiet him, “Can’t you ever trust me?”

“You just don’t think sometimes. This is my father you’ve trampled on, lying just beneath us. That man had so much discipline. He never complained. The only sick days he ever took were when he had pneumonia. That’s the meaning of strength. What I mean to say is that’s character. You don’t see that anymore. I’d feel lucky to live up to half of what he was. He made a modest living you know, a modest living and he spent most of it so that I could go to college without taking out loans. And he always knew the right thing to say. He was even-handed, my brother and me knew we were loved. When Matthew got polio he was in an iron lung for three months and my father was there by his side every day. And he still had time to help me study and come to my baseball games. He didn’t mess around playing favorites like your mother.”

“Dad, stop ragging on Mom for a second, huh? We’re in a goddamn graveyard.” Grady doesn’t look up from the work he’s doing.

“Watch your mouth. And I’ll stop talking about your mother when you stop using the Lord’s name in vain, eh? But anyway you’re right, Gray. Your mother loves you and Lucy. I shouldn’t talk like I do but I’m a flawed man, son. We’re all flawed men but we can strive, we can keep trying to be perfect. In His image.”
“There’s no such thing as perfect, Dad.” Grady softly blows on the letters he’s just carved.

“That’s where your wrong, Gray. Faith is perfect. We may not use it perfectly, but faith itself, that’s a perfect creation of God.” Daniel pauses and closes his eyes. “And God is perfect. Of course, we can take that one for granted.” He laughs softly.

“Faith is just an excuse for people to give up. Everybody’s always saying to have faith; that if something is meant to happen, God wills it into being.”

“People say that because it’s the truth, Grady. None of us has any control over a thing. Not a thing.”

“It sounds like a copout to me. Just an excuse to let your dreams die. Am I supposed to believe I’m selfish because I want to play music? Because I’ll do anything to make that happen? I’m not going to just sit back and love my neighbor and have faith that God will make me famous. That’s unrealistic. And it’s unfair, an unfair shake to everything that’s supposed to be good about the world. All the things we can do.” The boy runs his hands over the fresh white letters he’s exposed in the tree and begins to carve more.

“You’re forgetting I know you. You’re saying that just to get a reaction, so I’ll ignore it. Inside I know who you are and just who you’ll become. I just know it because I have faith. You may not have it, but if you don’t it’s only because you’ve never loved anyone, in your whole short life, the way I love you.”
“Thanks Dad, that’s great. *Fuck.*” Grady sucks on the finger he’s nicked with his knife.

“That’s why you write good lyrics,” His father continues, “You can’t write music if you don’t know the world around you. I’ll bet you notice things I’ve never even seen.”

“That’s not possible. You pretty much notice everything, and you never shut up about it either.” The boy has gone back to carving, the injured finger tucked safely into his palm now sticky with blood.

“Just so you know, your mocking tone has been noted. But I do try to be observant. It’s the inattentive man who doesn’t know where he is. You okay, Gray?”

“Yeah Dad, just a little cut.”

“I’d love to hear one of your songs sometime. Before you go off and leave us you’ll have to play one for me. If you teach me the words I can sing it.”

“Right. Okay.”

“Are you listening to me? Will you look at me? Gray? Stop destroying that tree. You hear me? I told you to stop!” Daniel suddenly shouts.

Grady clutches the knife and looks up at his father, “Fuck this, I’m out of here.” He begins to stalk off and then turns, “And *Fuck* you, Dad!” He cries over his shoulder.
Daniel runs after him, anger rumbling through his barrel chest and
growling up into his lungs, releasing into the stream of his huffing breath. But he
stops, reeling. Running a hand through his slicked hair. Wild-eyed. “My God,
these kids sometimes. These fucking kids.” He returns to where his father rests
inside the earth and looks at the words engraved in the trunk of the evergreen.
“Grady Rainey, 1901 to 1983. Loved.”
Nine

Amelia comes inside, the cold echoing off of her. Her camera loves the stark bareness of December branches. Honest gray wood twisting against a white cloudless sky. She shakes out of her boots, flinging them against the door to the laundry room and it rattles. Daniel coughs loudly from the living room to announce himself, or maybe he’s annoyed by the thump of the boots. Amelia sighs and pads into the kitchen. There’s leftover coffee in the pot from that morning, and she pours some of it into a mug and pops it into the microwave. As she turns to wash her hands she hears behind her the rap and scatter of an explosion and she clenches her fists and swallows her heart and cries out and it catches guttural in her throat and she turns again, hesitating halfway, raising her bent arms to cover her face, cringing and shaking, shuddering and gasping. The screen of the microwave shows the shattered remains of her mug, thin brown liquid seeps from the crack of the door and drips down the counter and drawers, puddles on the limestone tiles. Steam is rising from it.

“Shit!” Amelia’s voice is shaking and she’s hunched over, folding in on herself. Her hands are trembling, still wet from the faucet, still swollen red from the heat outside. She sniffs loudly and a knob of watery snot disappears from the tip of her nose. She takes up a red checkered dish towel and peers again into the microwave, surveying the damage, the blown apart mug and the hot fluid.
Daniel rushes into the room barefoot, his eyes wide, “What the hell happened in here? Jesus Amelia, are you hurt? Are you okay? What happened?” he repeats, crouching beside his wife and moving her hair behind her ears to look into her eyes. But she won’t look up from the towel.

“Daniel, it’s nothing. I just put the wrong mug in the microwave.”

Okay, just keep still a second. He moves to lift up some of the broken bits and stops himself, “Why are you even heating things up in this weather? It’s 90 goddamn degrees outside.”

“It’s not that hot.”

“These fucking things. Why can’t people just use the stove? I never should have bought the damn thing but everyone pushed it. You tell me, what’s the difference between having your tea after a minute or having your tea after five, off the stove?”

“It was coffee.” Amelia’s voice is far away as she watches the liquid continue its’ slow ripple down the counter.

“Don’t mock me,” Daniel says, rising to his feet above his wife. “Are you sure you didn’t get hurt? Stupid thing! I don’t want you using it anymore.”

“Daniel, you don’t want me to use the microwave? Let’s talk about this for a second here.” She peers at her husband as if he’s just come into focus.

Daniel leans toward her and whispers, “These people don’t care about your safety. They just want your money. Your money. No souls; churning these
things out. The next thing and the next thing. The next and the next. ‘What’s
next?’ Bill asks his neighbor, ‘I don’t know,’ the man answers, ‘but whatever it is
I want two.’”

“We don’t know anyone named Bill.”

“Don’t try to be funny, dear. And don’t use this fool thing again.” Daniel
takes a cigarette from his pack and walks back to the living room, leaving behind
his wife, her mess, and her limp ineffectual towel. She rises and wrings the towel
out in the sink, runs clean hot water over it, and begins to cry hunched over the
rising steam, the running water. She splashes her own face, pats down her neck
and looks again at the scattered shards on the floor.

Now in her kitchen she sees, as if it is happening, her son’s tender foot
pierced by a tiny ceramic sliver. He’d have trouble finding it once it was lodged
in his heel, and there would be pain with every step. Lucy, though, would notice
the tiny splinter before her foot even fell.

Just in the next room Daniel has settled down now. He is waiting for
snow. He’d already built a fire that morning, but out the large picture window the
vast expanse of the lawn is brown and dry, not creamy white. When things are
covered in thick snow, it’s like a second chance. Sometimes he hates his yard, his
house. His woods. He hates the pool, where rotting leaves lay iced to the surface
of the black tarp covering it. The diving board frosted and creaking in the wind.
He sits on the Victorian chaise that Amelia purchased at an auction. Daniel never
feels comfortable on the taut yellow scrolled surface, the hollows behind his
knees always rubbing against the carved and gleaming wooden frame. He leans
forward, dragging on the cigarette he’s lit in the fireplace, watching the window.

“Where’s Mommy?”

“Hi Sweetie, she’s cleaning up a mess in the kitchen.”

Lucy stands barefoot behind her father; Mister Rogers had started to bore
her.

“What are you looking at?”

“I’m waiting for the snow, Lucy.” He looks sad; his skin is grayish in the
afternoon light.

“I can wait too.”

“Oh yeah?” his tired eyes smile. “Show me, kiddo.” He stretches out his
arms, taking her up into his lap where she leans back into his belly that never has
any of the give of her mother’s.

“Where’s your brother?” Daniel asks.

“I don’t know.” But she does know. Grady is upstairs sleeping. From her
bed the night before, she heard him stumbling into his room just before dawn.
There was a sudden slippery cascade of falling records and he cursed softly
through the wall. Moments later she heard him in the bathroom that connected
her room to his. The porcelain plink of the lifted toilet seat hitting the tank, the
rustling as he bent before it, the echoing retch of his sickness. Soon afterward
Lucy drifted back to sleep. In the morning the warm acid smell of vomit hung in the hot air of the bathroom.

“Daddy you’re done waiting will you go out and play with me?”

“I don’t know, honey. I’ve been working so hard.” He heaves a sigh, closing his eyes.

Lucy stares out the window.

Amelia enters the room, her gaze cast down. She moves to her husband and daughter and for a moment she looks out the window with them, standing behind the chaise they occupy. But then she turns to the built-in bookshelves, scanning them though she knows just what she is looking for and where it is. Next to a copy of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is the book of her photographs. *Slice*. When she sees it she remembers watching Walter Cronkite reporting on Operation Rolling Thunder from her Connecticut living room. She’d just started at St. Raphael’s the fall before. That day she’d been reading about head injuries. In between flickers of Cronkite’s grave figure cut across by a news desk were shots of paratroopers billowing like great jellyfish and foot soldiers trudging through murky water. The planes cutting through the hills released tumbling bombs that exploded in domes of fire on the lush green below.

Daniel shoos Lucy off of his lap and stands up slowly, looking as if he’d like to take the book from his wife’s hands. Instead he says, “Come on Lucy; show me how fast you can run outside. I’ll time you.”
“Are we done waiting?”

“Do you want to play or don’t you?”

The little girl trots to catch up to her father, reaching for his hand. Her mother opens the book called *Slice* and there before her is a group of four young soldiers, slender and unformed, their arms white twigs. Three of them are bending out of a dust off, gingerly handing a sling gurney to some nurses with outstretched arms. They are grimacing with the effort. The one standing behind them peers out of the helicopter, stares at the nurses, searching for something with large, lost eyes. The boy in the sling has his eyes closed and with a fist is covering his bloody chest. The torn scrap of a shirt is tied around his left knee. His hair is stuck to his forehead, his face filthy, his mouth open wide, the inside of it only a fuzzy black circle in the photo. His helmet lies in the crook of his arm, where a large gash grins wickedly. Amelia turns the page where two soldiers are leaning toward each other in profile, one drizzling oil on an M 18, the other rubbing it in with a rag. They each have a pack of cigarettes rolled into one sleeve of their green army issue t shirts; each has a loosey tucked behind the ear that faces the camera. Dog tags glitter, catching the burn of the sun. One has acne, and he’s smiling at the other, an older boy from the looks of him, who is blowing a huge bubble with his gum. On the next page a raw sore is burnt into a thatched roof. This hut was the only one remaining when Amelia had gone to take pictures of the fire ravaged village just outside Bien Hoa. American soldiers had raided it the
day before, finding massive stores of UZIs, grenades, and explosives all supplied by the Chinese, hidden in feeding troughs, and under blankets on which babies squirmed, buried in small herb gardens. They also found children playing in the dirt, a few elderly women washing rice, a slender man with pink lips and smooth skin feeding his water buffalo. But this photograph shows only a charred pig lying dead on its side in the doorway of this last hut. A playing card, the ace of spades, is wedged into the cleft of his hoof. The red earth around the hut is littered with scorched straw, pieces of bamboo fencing, a scattering of feathers. The remnants of a child’s torched sandal. On this last page Amelia pauses. She wasn’t supposed to go to the village, wasn’t supposed to leave the base. But she’d made friends, like most of the nurses, and things were allowed to slide among friends.

Eighteen years later her husband tackles her daughter in the front yard of their tremendous house and the girl squeals and yelps and shrieks. Her son’s heavy tread hammers the ceiling above her head, and her book is on the shelf.
1967

Ten

"Betty signed up. So did Mildred. I heard they shooed Rachel away from the Air Force. Supposed to be just the pretty ones."

"What's pretty got to do with it?"

"Almost everything, just like anywhere else. It's got everything to do with it. I hear they make you spin around. Like you're doing some kind of screen test for sewing up blown off limbs. They should really just be asking if you're any good at puzzles."

Amelia looks up from the chart she is reviewing. "Are you two thinking about enlisting? You know they'll just send you right over there, don't you?"

The two nurses, Bonnie and Grace, smile at her. "Well, you're pretty enough, aren't you?" Bonnie says. Bonnie is a plump woman, even her scrubs hug her frame. "I'm sure looks really aren't all that important."

"Really, Amelia, they're all that's important around here, why would it be any different overseas?"

"Because we're at war," Grace says, and all three women go quiet, thinking about Dr. Walters, so young and so gentle, who had just volunteered the year before and was buried last month next to his grandfather, a decorated WWI captain.
"On to happier topics," Bonnie taps Amelia's arm with her pen. "How's that college boy treating you?"

"Fine," Amelia answers, remembering last night, something about the flash in Daniel's eyes, something about his voice. It made her nervous, frightened, really. They hadn't had a thing to drink. He was on about Hurricane Carter again, about justice and the law, and why everyone should just go ahead and forget it, Civil Rights. What were they living and dying for? A hose to knock down their children in the street? It might as well be guns, or Billy clubs. It just went on and on, there in his car, triggered by the news on the radio.

“Why can’t they just let a man be strong, you know, Millie?” Daniel had taken to calling her by the nickname only her dad occasionally used. She waved away the frequent thought that this was intentional. “Rubin Carter, strong as a storm and as out of control too, that’s what we’re meant to believe, isn’t it? Amelia sat with her hands folded, watching the rain ping against the windshield, gathering strength. She had reminded Daniel twice to turn on the windshield wipers, but he’d kept talking. She knew better than to join in, or take up a contrary opinion. She saw the merit in fighting for something, in dying for it. Deeply she felt that if children knew suffering it would do anything but kill them, anything at all but that, and it was a thing she couldn’t say, not even to Daniel. How else will they know the world just as it is? How else will they protect
themselves? No, a hose couldn’t kill a child, but a parent who gave up, a nation that gave up, now that would do it.

Daniel suddenly changed the station and James Brown’s The Payback bumped it’s angry rhythm into the car. Daniel gasped, “Ha ha! This is my song! Mine!” He pulled the car over and took her hand; his eyes were glittering, a million tiny shards, countless mirror edges. “Dance with me. Out there, come dance, Millie. I need to feel you. I have to feel your body move. I wish I could never take you home, wrap you up and snatch you away and fly with you, fly down the road in this car and see everything and then show it to you. I love to open your eyes, my girl. How I love that.”

“It’s raining, Daniel.” Amelia was smiling, willing this to be a joke, to pass over them like other times before. But then, she thought, is rain really so bad? What could it mean to want to dance in it? Maybe it washes things away, like some people think.

“A little rain scare you, huh? Silly Millie! Dance with me. It’ll be fun. I’ll get you all wet and slippery in my arms, mmmm boy.” His eyes closed and he breathed in the way he did when they kissed and he pressed his body into hers and repeated, “How soft, how soft.”

“Daniel, it’s late.” Amelia’s smile dissolved in the humid car, she jerked suddenly to roll down the window, not caring about the wind and rain, just needing the air. He brought the car to a halt at the side of the road.
“Come,” he said, pulling her by the arm, “Come out there with me and make me happy, baby.”

He sprang from the car and ran around to her side, rain pouring on him, pooling in his collared shirt. “It’s coming down out here, girlie!”

Amelia let herself be pulled out into the storm; she let herself be moved across the brambly shoulder of the road a mile from her house. She let her head fall onto Daniel’s shoulder; she let the shivers of cold pass through and along her body under the onslaught of rain. She let him whisper to her, pull up her dress and touch her, tell her how warm she was. She let him ease off of his high with his fingers inside her, even though his song was long over.

“Just fine?” Grace smiles. “If I had a handsome man in love with me like that, there’s no telling.” She doesn’t finish the thought. She doesn’t need to.

“Are you two enlisting,” Amelia asks again.

“No, but there’s a sheet to sign outside the lounge. If you put your name down you’ll take the shuttle over with the others and get your application. You’ll have an interview, a physical, and like I said, they’ll practically ask you to get naked and jiggle for them,” Bonnie snorts.

“Real cute, Bonnie,” Grace sighs, “Anyway, count me out.”

A while later Amelia is alone. It’s late and she’s one of three nurses on the floor, the other two are napping in the on call room. It’s a quiet night. She begins to feel afraid, as if she’s tumbling toward something. At first, each new
part of life excited her, all the things she hadn’t yet done, and Daniel introduced them to her, one by one.

Beautiful though she was, it was a beauty that snuck up on the observer, tapped him on the shoulder, whispered in his ear, and once he realized it was there, he was completely hooked in by it. But despite her loveliness she had never been on a date alone with a man, she’d never been kissed deeply the way Daniel kissed her, she’d never had a drink, and now she was sipping bourbon each night straight from the bottle. It was as if the newness of it all had been building and building, steadily climbing at first and then had gotten wobbly. She’d felt before that Daniel was in control, Daniel was watching her, giving her these pictures of life in bursts as harmless as bubbles. They’d come to be and quickly disappear, leaving nothing behind but the memory of the light they reflected.

Now there was a residue though, an accumulation of all things not quite right. A look from him, and then a series of them, the tone of his voice, the way he moved his body, or filled with rage over a thing, and the way that rage boiled over into jubilation; these things weren’t quite right. And Amelia knows, as she walks to the lounge, down a hallway so silent she hears her white canvas sneakers squeak against the floor; and signs that sheet, signs away whatever is to come in favor of a war, a thing that as yet has no meaning beyond the ugliness of a word, she knows that she is doing all of it to stave off the coming of that thing, whatever it is. The climax, the apex, the head of that not quite right thing before her,
looming. She also knows, though, that no matter what, it’s coming anyway.

Maybe it’s already here, and she let it in. She tells herself, shaking pen in hand, that she’s doing this to get away from her father, to leave behind her mother and the dark house and crushing sadness the powders down into numbness. It’s what she has to tell herself, because whatever is coming will come no matter what, will push aside anything in its way, will stake its claim in her body and pin her under its weight. And she will let it.
1986

Eleven

The little white car speeds down the road. It’s a wide road, empty. Well-paved so the sound of the car is smooth. The steering wheel hums under his hands—it’s a used car. But it’s light as a cloud and it sails and he can close his eyes when the road is empty like this and pretend he’s soaring. The heater is broken and blasting hot air into his face and so he has to keep changing the angle of his head to avoid one spot getting the brunt of it. Finally he rolls the window down and the January gale ripples into the flying vehicle, gnaws at his flesh because he is shirtless.

Grady loves driving bare-chested after a party. And this time he performed right at the start of the party and he was good, doing the great house justice, the white walls and their perfect moldings, the shiny thick glaze on the hardwood, two spotless dead fire places. Bare mantle. Even with the cigarettes and beer and pot and perfume the room smelled like polyurethane because the slick glaze on the floor was brand new. Any minute they could have been caught.

The grand room was empty of furniture, full of people; a mix of seniors from four prep schools in the area including Grady’s, Archer Academy.

Floor to ceiling windows showed manicured hedges through the dark, a lit tennis court, a smooth-bellied cherub perched on a cold dry fountain. All is quiet on New Year’s Day A world in white gets underway
Grady’s guitar rattles on the backseat as he accelerates and again he thinks perhaps he should have put it in the front with him. Like a passenger. He remembers with pride how its strum had echoed through the room. The crowd watching--his friends--shone like coins under water and he thought he understood now what his father felt bowed before the red candles in church. When he played and sang he squinted, bent his head. From the outside he looked to have become part of the song, but all the time he felt the people around him. Grady was sensitive to them as if they gave off a glare and he tingled all over. He was overwhelmed by the waves of heat that came from their skin, the shuffling noise they made beneath his guitar and the guttural rasp of his voice; yet he could hear it all. His fear made him an animal, a blind creature naked under a burning light. In rare and beautiful moments a song line would catch him as if snagging on a nail in his chest and he would have to grin hard, lips going white, teeth bared to the gums, straining to sing it out under the weight of joy that terrified him, spinning out of him, all around him. “I'm hiding sister and I'm dreaming, I'm riding down your moonlight mile.” In a moment his mouth would go slack again, his exhilaration dull to a sizzle on the edges of his eyes. It was unreal, terrible and marvelous all at once. If he could play and play, unravel little by little, twist into the melody and thread through the lyrics, if only if only if only. To be long like that, to bend unthinking through a confluence of sound and feeling, that would be authenticity. Grady knew this to be true, if only for himself.
When his set was over and he had bowed and inhaled the applause and hurt his face smiling and righted with even breathing the wild heartbeat behind his ribs he was restive. Wanting to run circles around the room, wanting to stretch his limbs far enough to touch its four corners, wanting to be unbound from his skin.

Now an hour later, Grady’s blood had begun to run more slowly, his heart beat steadied and he was thirsty. Even then he felt mighty. Things were just right. Heavy hands grazed his shoulders, patted his back and arms and face and hair as he made his way to the far corner of the room. They were all smiling at him, complimenting him. He leaned against the wall and cracked open a can of beer, gulping the ice cold froth down his throat. He slid down the wall with his guitar still hanging from his body and sat on the floor, hands crossed between raised knees, drained can dangling. Behind his closed eyes Grady felt the flicker of his pulse in the delicate skin of his warm lids. Tiny trails of sweat trickled from his hairline to his jaw. It was 11:30. He looked around him, examining the geometry of the way the people filled the room, the shapes of their groupings and the patterns they made across the floor. The design was constantly shifting, a kaleidoscope. In the middle of the floor, Stacy Preen from St. Cecilia’s Conservatory of Music pushed Chuck Ostroff, head tilted in a shriek, oily blonde hair falling away from her face. Chuck half collapsed into three of Grady’s friends from Archer, one of whom sprang back stumbling. “You’re such an asshole,” Stacy kept saying as she spun away into the fold of her stringy-haired
companions. Their arms reached out instinctively like wings to pull her in. Harpies, Grady thought, cringing. Bawdy and out for attention, thighs rubbing together in acid washed denim, cutting dark eyes and flashing earrings, vinyl heels shrieking on the new floor as the four of them tried to find the best angle to show themselves off. Grady’s eyes again found Chuck in his faded denim. He was nodding after Stacy with a “you’ll be back” smile twisting around his braces. The only way to handle a girl like that, Grady knew, and he didn’t have it in him to bother.

11:35 now and there was a sense of urgency. Twenty-five minutes to pluck her out of the crowd and kiss her, ending the night and beginning the year. He scanned the other three corners of the room, because the ones he liked were often wedged into corners, staring out in front of them as if there were no walls and ceiling, no defined space, but instead a vast expanse of shapeless black they couldn’t blink away to distinguish familiar contours. The ones he liked didn’t talk much, but when they did the frank simplicity of what they said was unexpected. They yearned for control and that fascinated Grady. The price of security for them was their own isolation. That’s the comfort of a corner after all, not just one wall to hold you up, but two.

Grady would never cram himself next to the ones he liked in the corners, he preferred pulling them out. Something about their uneasy reactions was touching. Their quivering bird necks and moist palms, their brushed clean shiny
hair, free of sweat from their stillness. Stark dry skin and no lipstick so you had
to look hard at their faces to find the poised mouth naked, aching in its silence to
be urged open with your tongue, but gently.

Now he was scanning first one corner and then another, and as his eyes
rounded to the third one he saw a redhead with dark angry freckles scattered
across her pale face and neck and arms. She was fanning herself with sleeve of the
Sticky Fingers album, her eyes arching across the ceiling, stargazing at the
spackle.

He approached her at 11:55, smiling and right away taking her hand.

“You were really good before.” She said, leaning back into the wall but
leaving her hand in his.

“Yeah, thanks. I’ve been playing for a while now.”

“Really? Were you one of those itty bitty wunderkinds?”

The ten second countdown began around them, rumbling voices picked off
the numbers with hushed intensity.

“Practically. Can’t you tell?”

“What’s your name?”

The voices around them reached “ONE!” and then, “HAPPY NEW
YEAR!” so instead of answering he kissed her, his guitar strapped across his body
between them.
“I’m Grady.” He’d released her then and with glittering eyes turned to look out the window at the shorn green lawn. Suddenly he’d felt very tired.

The weight of joy in his heart convinces him now that it’s gold in his chest, anchoring him in the swift car. He turns the radio up Get up get out get out of the door you’re playing cold music on the barroom floor and sings out with a sore throat Fire fire on the mountain alone and in communion with the righteousness of his path. It’s so clear. Wide open black air space before him and around him and inside him the possibility fills up heart heavy heavy heart feel it? Do you feel that, Grady? That’s the truth. He laughs. Welcome, 1986! The boy shouts this out of his car window.

His mother couldn’t look past her fear and see the path he was on and how perfect it was. How well it fit. She never could. As long as his life had been, she’d been that way. He no longer felt determined to convince her he could manage it all, now he felt only the urge to leave her behind.

When he was learning to walk, his father often joked, his progress was slow because Amelia refused to let go of his hand. His mother balked at these jokes, always defending herself by slighting Daniel.

“Well, who else was there to make sure he didn’t get hurt? Lord knows it wasn’t you.” She’d turn to Grady, telling the same story she always did. About the New Year’s he was seven months old with a hundred and six fever, having a febrile seizure in her arms, and she, frozen with terror in the small apartment,
alone and screaming, practically shaking him, “Grady! What’s wrong with you?!
Jesus, please! Be okay, please!” When the seizure subsided she’d hurried to the
bathroom and dunked him to his shoulders into the lukewarm water she’d been
running into the tub from the rusty faucet. Leaning over the chipped rim with
hands shaking, Amelia had splashed water on her son, noticing then the trickle of
blood coming from his mouth where he’d bitten his tongue during the seizure.
Drops of it formed tiny swirls in the bath water, pinking its tone. Amelia felt the
sweep of sickness through her gut and she dry heaved as she clung to her child
whose feet churned the bloody water before her. Breathing in deeply the young
mother waited for the nausea to pass, and when her lungs were filled with air she
pressed her fingers firmly into her son’s lips to stop the seep of red liquid. She
sang to him softly, the only song her full brain could think of. It was the one
Daniel sang whenever he was smoking out the window.

    So let it out and let it in

    Hey Jude begin

    You're waiting for someone to perform with

    And don’t you know that it’s just you

    Hey Jude you’ll do

    The movement you need is on your shoulder
Daniel had been at a party that Amelia refused to attend, not wanting to leave a sick baby with a sitter. Anyway, she’d always hated New Year’s. Too many damned expectations. Too many damned drunks on the road. Eventually they’d fallen asleep in the rocking chair together, Grady in a towel and Amelia in a soaked tee shirt and panties.

Even now the story makes Grady angry. His mother somehow thought of his suffering as something belonging to her. Whether he remembered it or not, shouldn’t his pain be his alone? In the biting cold his hands are numb; the heater’s harsh is racket futile against the coupling of the speeding of the car and the frigid wind.

None of it mattered anyway really; this time next year he’d be in New York. Maybe he’d get a studio in Greenwich Village. It wouldn’t have to be fancy, but near the park would be good so in the mornings he could walk down there and play chess with the old men. From his fire escape he’d be able to watch the dogs in their run, the kids splashing in the fountain. He’d spend lots of time on his fire escape, playing guitar, smoking, calling out to the girls with long shiny hair who walked by below, their heads rhythmically cutting in and out of sight through the metal slats. Inside he’d have only a mattress on the floor, a bookcase and stereo, his guitar and some photographs.

He’d play Thursday nights in a saw dusty bar on Bleeker somewhere, one with a neon sign and cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon, an authentic kind of place. The
bartender there would be a vulgar woman with graying front teeth and tattoos up and down her doughy white arms. Maybe he’d meet a girl. Someone bookish and quiet and warm. Maybe he’d meet lots of girls. All of them different, the many faces of a flashing gem. It was so clear.

If he was feeling nostalgic when he packed maybe he’d bring along his mother’s book. The few times he’d thumbed through it he’d gotten this feeling like he was catching a glimpse of something inside her, something that was always there but that was new to him. It was familiar though, because that something was also his. He felt, when he looked at those photographs that he was seeing her, but also looking at himself. His mother was more than his mother to him then, and it terrified him, as if she were a painting, the profile bust of a woman who one day suddenly stood up and turned her head.
Amelia thought she’d already said her goodbyes. She’d ironed her clothes, folded them neatly into the red leather suitcase her father had bought her when she graduated high school, perhaps in the hopes she’d go somewhere exotic. But not like this, she’s sure he never thought it would be this way. He hasn’t really spoken to her much since she’d told him she was leaving for Fort Dix. Even under the same roof, since she’s graduated, he’s been distant. In truth, they haven’t been the same together since Daniel, since they argued, since she’d hurt him in a way she’d never thought possible.

Her mother was a different story. She’d been crying, leaking tears every time Amelia walked into the room. It seemed as if there was a tiny fissure in her eye, one that yielded tears unceasingly, seemed unable to control itself. It is the most aware her mother has been in recent years. She always seems to know why she’s crying. Amelia thinks perhaps it’s good she’s going away, maybe the shock awakened something in Dorie, brought her to life. Amelia is trying, even now as she puts a box of her things together to store in the attic, make room for the aide that will be moving into her room to help care for Dorie, not to feel like a horrible person. She’s avoiding the mirrors. Mirrors make her cry when she’s feeling this way. She pulls strands of hair out of her ponytail, a nervous habit, and lets them
break and fall to the carpet. She’ll vacuum before she leaves. She remembers when she’d first told her father about Vietnam.

“You signed up? You chose this?” He winced, as if it were only heartburn, as if he’d eaten too fast, and then the expression disappeared. “What does Daniel have to say about all this, Millie?”

“It’s got nothing to do with him, Dad.” Except it did. A little bit, at least, it did. Amelia had been noticing lately that Daniel could speak of nothing but Hurricane Carter. Just a week ago, at a party, after he’d proudly introduced Amelia to his friends as “Vietnam bound and not even afraid,” he’d pulled her into a corner and began it again, “Two eye witnesses! Two! That’s what they’re saying, but one interview took place in a hospital. Tell me, how can a man finger another man, be so sure about it too, if he’s lying half-dead in a hospital. You tell me that. It doesn’t add up, none of it, except he was headed for glory. These guys, they’re all afraid. They’re afraid, Millie. Afraid a black man’s going to come along and be better, smarter, quicker, stronger. Gotta cut them down, I guess. Keep on cutting them down.”

“It’s very sad,” Amelia whispered into her cup. She did mean it. She didn’t disagree with Daniel. It was just the way he got about it, loud and red in the face, his hands clutching the air around him, trembling. It was like he was reaching for something, pulling things out of the atmosphere, pleading with the world to back him up, be as angry as he was.
“You know I wrote to the D.A,” Daniel said, suddenly quiet.

“What did you say?”

“Told him I know racism when I see it. Told him I know what he is.”

“I don’t think that was a good idea, Daniel.”

“It was the only idea, Millie. The only way to make change is to get into it with someone like that. You gotta call ‘em on their bullshit, my dear, that’s what you gotta do. People like that aren’t used to being challenged.”

“Maybe not, but—“

“Listen, I know what I’m doing. Next I’m writing to Carter’s lawyers. I think I got some ideas for the defense.”

“Ideas?”

“Sure! You don’t need a degree to know right from wrong, to think out a plan that makes sense. I’ve got what you need already.”

Amelia couldn’t help smiling at the look on his face. This was how it often went, she was alarmed by his energy, but really, she admired it too. The causes he’d take up, they were noble, mostly unpopular among their peers. He was sincere, that’s what it was. He really did care. And god, did he love her. There was no room for doubt. Amelia was sure, in the history of man and woman, no one was ever so loved. “What’s that?”

Amelia believed that about Daniel’s mother. She was crass and she didn’t budge an inch if she had an opinion. Especially if it was about Amelia’s hair, clothes, lipstick, or how quiet she was at the dinner table. She supported Amelia going overseas though, and seemed proud of her. It was nice, to have someone proud of her, when all her mother could do was cry, and all her father wanted to know, bitterly, was how Daniel felt about all of it. Wasn’t she brave, after all? Wasn’t this the right thing to do? Whether or not Daniel made her uneasy, or her father drove her to it, wasn’t the deed still where the merit was?

In the attic she pauses, remembering that besides Hurricane Carter, Daniel couldn’t stop talking about sex. After that party, he was so drunk he begged her, crying, with shuddering sobs, to let him inside her. She lay underneath him on his bed, around them the house was silent; Clara had taken a weekend trip to visit her sister. Amelia had known where they would end up, and she did long for him, she did wonder about sex, though she’d never dare ask him if he’d ever had it. She was afraid of the answer. What she knew about sex was that it would change them, that maybe it would hurt a little, that she might bleed. The thought was embarrassing. Daniel had taken his clothes off, and he’d removed her shirt, but that’s all she’d allow. He touched him a little, hoping to that would stave off what they seemed to be barreling toward, and moved on top of her, pressed into her, begging, telling her he loved her, saying he couldn’t bear it apart a moment more, and she was leaving him. How would he survive?
She wonders now how she’d managed to avoid it. She feels proud and disappointed at once. If only he’d been calmer, more gentle, maybe. She wanted him too, but not like that. She walks down the attic stairs, pushes the trap door back up to the ceiling. She hadn’t realized how late it was. In the morning, she’d leave for Fort Dix, the first unknown, the lesser one. She can do this incrementally, she thinks. That’s the way.

Her parents are asleep in their bed; as she passes their room she wonders how they can sleep. They must have both taken a pill, she knows. Neither of them could eat dinner, though her father had made a big show of trying to choke it down, like this was just another thing his adult daughter was doing, like he didn’t have a say. And he didn’t, really. But maybe he should have said something. Amelia thinks, he could have. It wouldn’t have stopped her, but just to hear him say it would have been something. If she let herself think about it too long, she’d realize nothing he could have said would have been right. She gently eases their door closed, moves to her own room, and finds Daniel there, in her bed. He’s not smiling, or crying, and she swiftly pulls her door shut, hissing at him for an explanation.

“I am going to make love to you. I know you’re afraid, but this is the right thing. With you leaving. We must do this. I need you to know how much I love you. How deep it goes. If we do this, we’ll never really be apart. Please.” His voice is calm, he’s pleaded his case and he’s docile. He looks handsome lying
there, and in control. The way he looked when they met, and Amelia moves
toward him. She switches off the bedside lamp and takes a breath. This is what
she wanted.
To Amelia Perrin, 12th Surgical Hospital, Cu Chi, Vietnam 11/11/67

My Darling Amelia,

Today I sat in the courtyard and stared at the dogwoods. Even in the blistering cold they are beautiful, though they are bare. But you are beautiful because you are bare and when you are bare you are so honest. It was windy today and my face was chapping but I stayed in front of those trees because they reminded me of you. My eyes were tearing in the gale so I turned up my collar. I stayed there in the ice brittle grass and thought of you.

This should be a good year for me; the best. I’m a senior, I’m student body president, but all I can think of is you. This love may destroy me, but don’t think for a second it’s not worth it. I’d let it tear through me; nourish itself on my bones if it needed to. I am utterly dedicated to you and to it, my dear. And I know you feel the same.

It will be Thanksgiving soon, and I have a lot of blessings. You, and our love, and the anticipation I feel through to my fingertips when I think of you returning to me. By then it will be warm. Thank you. Thank you for you. My mother wishes you could be with us for the holiday, but she knows what you are doing is important. All my father can say is that you are brave. Very brave. He tears up
when he says it. They love you already.

At night I lay restless thinking of you, the wisest the loveliest the kindest the softest. You are porcelain perfect and precious. And you are mine, what a lark! What incredible fortune, she’s smiled on me with all of her teeth showing she’s bared them to me because she is honest like you. And you are mine! I want to sing it. I want to give you everything you’ve ever wanted. I want to marry you and take care of you. We’ll be important. We’ll be so important. The new Kennedys because that’s where we’re headed, only with a better ending. Camelot.

Do you think I could be a politician?

I want to undress you. I want to tangle you with me and me into you. Don’t you dare blush. God intended us for these human fumblings, these clumsy rhythms recognized from decade to century and beyond time indeed. Think on this. Think of me as I think of you. And write.

Love,

Daniel
To Daniel Rainey, Copley Hall, Georgetown University, Washington DC,

11/22/67

Dear Daniel,

I’m still in the hospital in Cu Chi. It’s a box made of corrugated tin and when it rains we’re all inside a kettle drum. And it rains hard here. We work twelve hour days so I’m relieved that after two weeks I’ve finally been able to sleep at night. We’re lucky. We have a bathroom in our quarters, running water and a toilet. It’s cold water, but water just the same. I guess nurses have to smell good to keep morale up. Anyway it’s crazy to sleep here. There’s VC tunnels right below us. While I’m writing this, right now the tunnels are there under my feet. Under the dirt. It feels so solid. That’s what it’s like here. It feels solid all the time. They send guys down there, they’re called tunnel rats, to check for VC, explosives. They haven’t found any since I’ve been here. They’ve found crudely built tables still covered in tree bark, stumps for seating, stolen MRE’s, some blankets and some dirty clothes. But no people. Not today. Not yesterday. But they come out sometimes. Sometimes they come out so they must be under there. Not since I’ve been here, but there are stories. Before I got here they tried to blow them up, all the tunnels. That was back in January.

I’ve started taking pictures. A few days ago I had my hand pressed over the belly of a twenty-one year-old to keep his intestines from sliding out. He was waiting
for medical attention. A mortar round exploded on the Ho Chi Minh trail and there were seven guys with injuries worse than his. He died. He died this morning; massive organ failure induced by sepsis. You know what sepsis is? It’s when your blood turns to poison. I remember when I learned about that at St. Raphael. I think that’s when I realized that I’d actually see people die. That I’d get to know them, take care of them, and then they’d die.

There are boys coming in, gangly ones who were probably all arms and legs at home, except now they have no arms, or no legs, or beat up heads with rolling eyes, or bloody throats, slobbering mouths missing teeth. The doctors and nurses call the ones who they know are a lost cause “the expectants.” They sectioned a part of the hospital off with a curtain for those guys and I can hear them all the time, coughing, breathing, doing things that living people do, because even though they are dying, for the time being they are still alive. I don’t take their pictures. I don’t even part the curtain.

I miss you, but I can’t imagine cold, I can’t think of dogwoods or the holidays or Kennedy or sex. I can only read your letters once. But I’ll save them.

-Amelia
To Amelia Perrin, 12th Surgical Hospital, Cu Chi, Vietnam 12/01/67

Dearest Amelia,

I think I’m too old for this shit. I know, intellectually, that twenty-one isn’t old, not really, but I’m over all the bullshit, you know? The parties, the rote memorization of facts I’ll never need, the smiles at the right time and the sleepless nights. I’ve been having a lot of those. Nights without sleep. I’m tired. I don’t mean to complain, I’m sorry, it’s just I miss you is all. I keep thinking you’ll come home soon, but we don’t know that, do we?

It’s been getting hard just to get to class. I’m tired all the time. I said that already, but it bears repeating. Sometimes I skip my Thursday morning Sociology class and just lay in bed and think of you. It doesn’t help. I’m lonely. I’m alone. It seems pointless, this whole place is a fucking hamster wheel, you know that? And I’ll tell you a secret: no one is going anywhere. I don’t think the sun’s been out in days. I mean, it’s not pitch black all day; it’s not like Armageddon or anything but still. Sunless and cold and gray. That’s what it’s like here. Every party the same, every conversation, every paper I write feels identical to the last one and I actually go back and check sometimes, I really physically look at them to make sure they’re not exactly the same, word for word.
That sounds crazy, doesn’t it? I sound crazy. It’s just longing. That’s the word for the sunless gray, longing. I long for you. It’s not romantic, it’s not poetic. It’s a real, visceral suffering. Please, please come home.

Love,

Daniel
To Daniel Rainey, 100 Plymouth Road, Springfield PA, 12/10/67

Dear Daniel,

You must be on winter break now, so I’m sending this letter to your house. We’re in a stand down. Tonight there’s party going on in Phu Lo. I decided I’m going. Usually I just try to sleep through the other nurses getting ready, I’d put my pillow over my head when they passed around a joint, I’d ignore them when they’d nudge me or poke me. Why does everyone here feel like they have to do everything together all the time? But I know why now. These two GIs are going to pick us up and take us over. There’s a pool on our base too but I guess going elsewhere makes us feel like we’re getting out. Anyway, pool is a liberal term.

I haven’t been feeling well lately, I know I need a night out. It’ll feel good to dance and drink and go away, if you know what I mean. Yes, I’m going to drink, though I know it, I’m a lightweight. I’m not telling you this to make you mad, but I’m tired of writing about the rest of it. In all the rest of it there’s isn’t music or a sad little pool. You must understand that, right? I know how you get blue and I wish I could say more to make you feel better, but I’m not there. I’m just not there, Daniel.

-Amelia
To Amelia Perrin, 12th Surgical Hospital, Cu Chi, Vietnam 12/20/67

Dear Amelia,

It’s good to be home. I was sick of the city and here I don’t even have to think. Everything around me is about Christmas. It felt good to go to church again, I haven’t been in months. It’s nice to see how nothing’s changed here.

Mom and Dad are just the same. Fish on Fridays, church on Sundays, the 6:00 news. Yes, I’ve been watching. We’re all worried about you but we know they keep the women out of harm’s way. That’s what my dad keeps saying, that you’ll be fine. I just wish I knew when you’d be home.

My mother does all my laundry, cooks me anything I want. She’s so happy I’m home she seems delirious with it. Matthew’s not as thrilled, I’m getting most of the attention, but what’s he expect attending community college and living at home? What’s to fawn over in that? I don’t mean to be nasty, I love my brother but there’s not much to him.

And I love you. I love you to pieces. When you come home I might make love to you until you shatter, but I hope you don’t. I hope you stay strong. You should know when I got your last letter I was so angry at you. Going to a party with two men? Strangers? Do you know what could have happened? You can’t just go around doing whatever you want, you have to take care. You’re not a man over there. We’re not all the same, don’t you see that? Try not to be so naive. I
could never stay mad at you though. You can’t know what men are thinking.

How could you know? We’re a rotten lot of liars and you all make us better. I need you. You know how much. Just be careful. No more parties, okay? I know you’ll be home soon, and then I’ll have you for good!

Love,

Daniel
To Daniel Rainey, Copley Hall, Georgetown University, Washington DC,
01/07/68

Dear Daniel,

Yesterday I found out I’m twelve weeks pregnant. It must have happened that last night. It’s due in August. I’m flying home first thing in the morning. By the time you get this letter I’ll be back, so I’m not sure why I’m writing it. I’ll see you soon.

Love,

Amelia
1986

Fourteen

Lucy has been thinking about it. The way her parents let her stay up in her footie pajamas and watch the ball drop on their bulky wood-paneled television with the new rabbit ears on top and her father put a glittery silver tiara on her head that said 1986 and lifted her onto his shoulders and spun around and around until they both fell back on the couch and he kept calling it “champagne for minors.” And then both of her parents had tucked her in together, a thing she had begged for, a thing they never did, each bending to kiss her forehead and cheeks and sweep her hair behind her ears. He father made the sign of the cross on her forehead and her lips and her mother said I love you twice, then three times. Involuntary, like a heart beating. She has been thinking about it and it all makes sense. Maybe they knew what was going to happen. Maybe they knew they'd have to start pouring all of their love into her. Focusing on her to avoid the horror of what's happened. It makes sense, now that she's their only child.

All of the children in Lucy’s first grade class sent cards home with Luke Campbell, the neighbor’s son. They are made of folded construction paper in assorted colors, scribbled on with crayon. One says, “Sorry you are sad,” and below it appears a rain cloud with a frowning face drawn in the middle of it. Another says, “I love you,” but the word “love” is not there. In its place is a hollow wax heart. Luke sits on the carpeted step below Lucy, looking up at her.
“Where do you think he is?”

“Who?”

“Your brother.”

“I don’t know.”

“My mom said he was baptized, so he’s definitely in Heaven.”

“That would be good.” But Lucy swallows hard; Grady didn’t believe in God or Heaven, so maybe he’s just in the ground.

“He can play Frisbee with Cody.”

Cody had been Luke’s Golden Retriever. He died of cancer the year before. Lucy remembers the lumpy hanging tumors, the way at the end he couldn’t walk. She can’t picture him playing Frisbee.

Her mother is sitting in the kitchen facing the window, wrapped around her is a green army blanket so that from the neck down she looks like a Christmas tree that is drying out and fading away. At her elbow sits a watery warm fruit cocktail. Luke’s mother had given Amelia three valium and now her eyes catch the light like the glassy wet wings of an insect. They dart though she is still. She’s subdued, reined in but throbbing. She isn’t thinking about her son and his horrible death. She isn’t thinking about her husband, who at this moment is turning Grady’s room into a giant collage of torn photographs and childhood art projects and sheet music, she isn’t thinking about her daughter, whose big moist eyes seem only to stare now, whose voice seems no more than a whisper, afraid to
break the thin membrane of aching calm in the house, of inward thrashing.

From the stairs Lucy and Luke Campbell hear Daniel cry out above them.

Scuffles are heard through the ceiling, muted thumps, clattering and deep guttural sobs. The children look away from one another, at the banister, at the wall.

“We just got Ghostbusters on tape. And we have a new VCR. It has a remote control. You could come over and see it.” The boy says suddenly. He thinks Lucy is pretty the way a pale sun is pretty, barely glowing but strong.

When he and Mrs. Campbell go home, Lucy goes into the kitchen and stands before her mother, who is staring out the window. She moves closer and can smell that her mother hasn’t washed, hasn’t brushed her teeth. She smells like herself but it’s a stronger smell, and in its’ own animal way it’s lulling. Lucy inches closer to stand beside Amelia whose chest flutters under the thick blanket she’s robed in. The little girl rests her head on her mother’s shoulder, and thinks about how her father had gotten her dressed for the funeral two weeks earlier. Amelia had wanted her to wear a dark green plaid dress that Lucy hated because it itched and was ugly. She pleaded with her father to dress her in purple velvet with a bright white lace collar. It wasn’t a hard sell, and when she was dressed Daniel knelt in front of her and held her arms, gently pulling her to his chest and whispering in her ear, “My Lucy, my Lucy, my Lucy. I love my little girl. I love you so much.” And soon he began to cry and his massive chest shuddered against her and she froze in terror and he asked, “Does it scare you when I cry? It’s okay
to cry Lucy. I don’t want to scare you honey I love you so much. Put your arms around my neck. I need that. Are you afraid?”

“No, Daddy. I’m not afraid.”

“Are you sad about Grady?”

“Yeah.”

“We’re all sad, honey. It’s okay to be sad. Hug me tighter.”

“What is she wearing?” Her mother’s voice comes from behind them, flat.

“She wanted this dress. She doesn’t like the other one.”

“I don’t think that dress is appropriate for a funeral. Lucy, we have to change you, take off your shoes.”

Daniel stands and takes a handkerchief from his pocket, wipes his face. On his way out the door he squeezes Amelia’s shoulder and she puts her hand over his. Lucy doesn’t see it though; she’s taking off her shoes.

Now she wants to ask her mother, “What’s going to happen?” But she doesn’t. What she really needs to know is, will it always be like this now? But that’s not something she can ask, because there is this sense of equality now. The death of her brother has brought the three of them to an even space of unknown, where each second of life as it progresses is bare and stark and unforgiving.
Fifteen

Daniel isn't certain how he got here. He stands with his hands against the wall he's just decorated. Scattered around his bare feet are the jagged edges of photographs like tiny birds, unneeded scraps of his life. Just now he is sweating, and newly worried about what Amelia will say. Now that's he's taken something from her, her precious albums, and deconstructed them. After all, this is where they are now. Knocked down and rising again, in a different configuration. There's a need he feels for redefinition. And here, gazing at the wall above Grady's bed, he can work his mind around how to do it. The first step was cutting the pictures up. He'd ripped them from the albums, which lay in a pile to his side; some pulled half out of their bindings, some still containing scattered photos with gaps between them like missing teeth. On the wall, there's Grady's eyes, and next to them Lucy's shoulder, Daniel's hand. It's a collage. He wasn't thinking when he made it. He was refusing to, he was listening in a way, to the energy of the images, choosing them from a feeling they gave him. But now, what will Amelia say? Daniel can bide his time; she won't dare come in here. She has barely moved.

Sitting at the table so her many caregivers will keep silent about her refusal to eat. If the food is next to her, untouched, they don't have the nerve to say a word. Daniel wants to know who will take care of him. He hasn't eaten. He
hasn't slept. Grady was his son. His only son. How is it that the mother gets priority?

Again, as he inhales, he wonders how he got here. Why did he ever buy Grady that fucking car? He thinks how terrifying, how insane it is that the legal driving age is sixteen. Sixteen! As if a teenager can make a good decision, can make any decision. Teenagers drift. They go from good feeling to good feeling, Daniel knows, and nowhere else. How can that kind of person be cautious? They make it so hard.

And Amelia now, downstairs practically being spoon fed like a baby by her father. That morning as he headed to retrieve the photo albums he'd heard them talking at the table, or rather, Jack's voice insisting itself into the silence.

"How could this happen? He shouldn't have had that car. That boy was so much like Daniel. Too much. And now here you are. Here you are now." Then it was silent again, when perhaps Jack knew he'd said too much, that somehow his words weren't being heard. And he was left to see that he was the kind of father who would say those words to his suffering child. That's just who Daniel had always known him to be. A piece of shit. A needy, self-righteous nightmare of a man. A hollow-eyed slave to convention.

Somehow this loss reminds him of when Lucy was born, and he justifies this by acknowledging the circle of life given to the earth by God, that a circle has
a movement to it, that movement is meant to be a comfort, a sort of rocking. Life rocks you if you give into it. And this is why it is, this is why.

When Lucy was born, Jack had come with Dorie, just as they were here now, fawning over Amelia as if she were the new baby and not the mother. Daniel could see she hated and loved the focus at once. It was something she needed. She was weak, he thought. And she hated that about herself almost as much as he hated it in her.

It was right around that time Grady started his disappearing acts. At ten years old he was more like fifteen, with serious eyes prone to flashing in anger, and sullen footsteps often followed by a slamming door. Daniel liked to imagine where he went. He didn't have to imagine why, just where. With so much wood, so many trees, Daniel could pretend his son took after him, surrendering himself to the power of the swaying branches, the crackle of the soft earth, a sinking feeling in some places. Maybe his son was a better man, though, even at ten. Yes, Daniel couldn't see Grady feeling the need to cut anything down. Maybe the boy leaned against the trees. Maybe he crumpled down and fell asleep. Maybe he wished his sister had never been born.

Amelia had been considering divorce when Lucy made her appearance on a blood test in late April of 1978. And then, what else was there to do? Grit their teeth. Well, Daniel thinks, she grit hers, didn't she? He'd always wanted her, loved her, even in her coldness, even with her nerves, he'd willed her not to leave.
Lucy was the answer to some cry issued by his heart, the gift offered up into a bare and empty life. She’d be able to see things, Daniel thought before she was born. And for a while, life had been good. For a while, with the baby girl growing inside his wife, life got easier. They both knew it would be a girl. And they both knew what a girl could do for a house, what she was meant to do. Daniel remembers that they went to see Apocalypse Now in the theatre during the pregnancy. Amelia kept scratching her belly in line for the tickets, complaining that the baby was stretching her skin and that she kept forgetting to buy cocoa butter and poking his arm and saying shouldn’t he remember that? Since he doesn’t have to carry the baby couldn’t he at least remember her comfort? She had on a red paisley print shift and Dr Scholl’s corrective sandals for her flat feet and she hated the way the wood soles clacked when she walked, but since she said her feet were too swollen for any other shoes, “Like fucking sausages,” she said, she supposed she’d have to make do. When they sat down she pushed his arm off of her arm rest. “You men take up so much room. Think you own the world.” She said through a mouthful of licorice.

Daniel just shook his head and smiled, watching Martin Sheen do Tai Chi in the nude. He heard his wife inhale deeply once, then twice next to him. She reached out and squeezed his knee and he bent toward her ear. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just let me watch the movie.”

Daniel reaches across her arm rest and scratches her belly and she sighs.
“Your fingers are much stronger than mine. Thanks.” She stuffs a licorice whip into his mouth when he opens it in a wordless request and they and turn back to the screen. Amelia was afraid to look around her, Daniel noticed. How many vets were there? He thought he could spot clusters of them. The men were easy to pick out. It was the women he'd been eternally looking for whenever he had occasion. What would a nurse look like at the movies? How would a journalist for the Stars and Stripes make herself known? Sometimes he felt, if only he could see one of them, if only he could trace their shapes in the dark, take in their eyes, their nervous fingers, their secret torment, he'd know just how to keep his wife forever. Something about her was like sand slipping through his fingers. He couldn't hold onto her. He couldn't squeeze hard enough to keep her together. It made him try to remember what she was like before the war. Before she decided to go, was she whole?

The voice of Marlon Brando brings him back to the present and his mind silent for the rest of the film. Afterward Daniel and his wife emerge glassy-eyed, walking slowly with cramped legs.

“We should have seen that at night.” Amelia says, squinting in the sunlight and rubbing her neck.

“Well now we have the whole day ahead of us. What do you want to do?”

“I can’t think right now, Daniel.” Amelia answers, sitting on a bench outside the theatre.
“We could have sex.” Her husband suggests.

“Brilliant idea, Daniel. Brilliant.” She scowls at him, but after a moment she smiles and pats the seat next to her. Her husband sits. “Sorry I’m so cranky.” She says after a minute. I just can’t wait for this baby to be born already.”

“I think it’s a girl. We should name her Lucia, for the patron saint of light.”

“Isn’t there something about her having had her eyes poked out?”

“Well maybe just Lucy then.”

Amelia was looking at the fluttering under the bulge in her red paisley shift. “Lucy. I could love a little baby named Lucy.”

Suddenly Daniel realizes he’s used the wrong glue for his collage. He's filled the whole wall, but now he sees some of the shiny crooked photos begin to separate and slide downward, trickles of white school glue bleeding out onto the floor, dribbling in rivulets toward one big puddle centered where the floor is uneven. Glue sticks in between the floorboards, it dries with a skin on its surface, and now some of the images, those he's placed so carefully on display, pull away from the wall and bend gracefully over, revealing wet sticky backs, and fluttering onto the glue glittered floor. Daniel stoops to gather them up as they fall, these fragments of their history, these forever altered images, forever altered not by Daniel's scissors, or Lucy's school glue; neither their placement nor descent from Grady's wall is what has altered them, but rather, his death has. This evidence has
been rendered fictional. Daniel knows time is not in fact linear; this is only how humans experience it. If the future will not contain Grady, then the past must also lack him now. And there's no way to make sense of it, to keep it together somehow, yes, just to keep it together has proven impossible. All of this shining madness is a lie. Daniel feels the photos sticking to the flannel of his shirt, he smells the glue as it dries to his wrists and his hands, and he lets himself sink. He lowers himself into the pile, pressing his cheek against what's left of the new fiction of his son. In his heart, he wants nothing more than to believe Grady was real, but all the proof is gone.
Sixteen

Amelia spends her mornings sitting in a wooden chair scattering bird seed from a paper bag out the window and onto the fire escape, watching some of it rattle through the gaps to the street below. Fighting pigeons snatch up the seeds from the metal slats in a fluttering swarm of dirty wings. Soon she’ll be too big to lean out the window like this, Amelia thinks. Then who will feed the birds? She watches the hushed rage of the feathers, the mad shrieking and stomping. She’d been feeding the birds since the weather had begun to get warm, and now in June it’s hot enough that if she’s at it too long she begins to sweat. In the city the breeze is only occasional, less of it each day, she’s noticed.

They rented this apartment on Spruce Street in January, just after Amelia came home, just after a small wedding at City Hall. Daniel had gone on about how Philadelphia should still be the political capitol. Could all that history really be denied? They should feel lucky they got such a steal on Spruce Street, so close to Independence Hall. It wasn’t really a steal though, more of a room with a fire escape window, a bed in the corner, a footed tub and towel warming bar, the highlights, in the bathroom. Someone had cut mustard yellow daises from a sheet of wallpaper and stuck them to the sides of the tub to match the shade the bathroom was painted. The bathroom floor was made of tiny white hexagonal tiles, blackened grout between them that could not be cleaned. Daniel wanted all
the time to conserve heat, so during the day Amelia would get cold and run a bath
for herself, her arm draped over the side of the tub, her wet fingertips dripping
onto the dirty tiles.

By the fire escape window they’d placed a small round table, and in the
corner was a beige refrigerator with a slim metal handle, a tiny oven, faux wooden
wallpaper that began on one side of the window and ended behind the refrigerator.
The rest of the walls were in the room were white.

Amelia’s mother had loved feeding the birds. Even in the hospital she’d
loved it. When they’d go to visit, she and her father would wheel Dorie outside
and hand her a loaf of day old bread they’d stopped off for on the way. The birds
knew her, as a child Amelia could swear it; those birds saw her mother coming.
They appreciate those things. Even their small brains bear the nuance of gratitude.
Wildness breeds adaptation. She’d like, even now, to believe that she doesn't feed
the birds because her mother loved it, or that she does it to prove the birds could
love her too, that it wasn't Dorie, something unique in her, some light, that the
birds fluttered toward, huddled around for warmth. For security. Amelia knows
though, it's a little of both those things. And something else. Something that has
become familiar to her, something to which she's no longer exposed, but still
needs. Her body stretched to accommodate panic, and now, inside that space
there is emptiness, there is a gush of air, she imagines, blowing through her. She's
hollow in that space and bodies are meant to be efficient. Relaxation is wasteful
now, her body tells her. But the baby can fill it, she comforts herself, and the
birds, watching the birds can elicit a little bit of the familiar panic, somehow.

She remembers a party some of the GIs had thrown at the hospital in Cu
Chi. It was a “Farewell Leg” party for Scams. Everyone brought pictures of
healthy legs to hang up around the room, sort of like desensitization, Scams had
said. “You’ve seen one leg you’ve seen ‘em all,” and then he’d shake his stump,
laughter everywhere but in his eyes.

Scams got his name from the stories he told about where he was from,
what he’d done before the war. He was nineteen, but he’d been a lobsterman in
Maine, a ventriloquist in the Catskills, a model. He’d get really
into the story as
he’d tell it, splaying out his big goofy hands as he spoke. Down to the details it
felt real. But none of it was. He was always the one to tail any American woman
he could find, and he’d try to keep it light, jokey, following right behind Amelia
while she snapped photos and asking, “Did you get a good one?” But underneath
the jovial pats and squeezes there rose a frightening energy. The power of
derprivation and desire burned a hole in the small space he left between himself
and Amelia’s back. So she was never alone with him.

Then his leg was amputated, having been caught in a shit smeared VC
tanglefoot. The medics tried to save the leg, cleaning it right away in the middle
of the jungle path where he’d stepped onto the single strand of filthy barb wire,
but they only rubbed the feces deeper into the running blood that soaked his
fatigues and splattered his boots as he shook in anguish. A week later in the hospital the leg was gangrenous. Giant patches of flesh were porice and charcoal black at their edges, in the middle red and pulpy, glittering with beads of pus. He joked that his leg looked like a brick oven pizza, but between doses of morphine he’d simply scream, until they put him out and cut off his leg.

The party was held the night before he went back home. That afternoon Amelia had come to see him with her camera. She parted the curtain around his bed and he grinned at her, exposing his crooked teeth. His long face was sweaty and his cropped hair dull with grime. He continually refused the sponge baths offered him; he wouldn’t look at the other nurses, only wave them away. But he looked right into Amelia’s eyes. “I’m not nineteen you know. I forged my birth certificate. I didn’t even do a good job either, those guys knew. I’m seventeen.” He turned his head to the wall and Amelia noticed there were no pictures hanging there. No letters, just a long yellow plane with a polished eggshell sheen. Amelia snapped his picture and he turned to her, staring, so she took another. She took pictures of his healthy leg; and pictures of the snarled white sheet where his other leg was not. She took some of his thin arms with their peach soft hairs, the points of his elbows, not yet calloused and still awkward, the legs of a new foal. She took some of his dewy blue eyes and his thick black lashes. She took one of his jaw; sparse stubble and sweat and oil, and whatever lay deep in the liquids he seeped that was unique to him. She told him she’d send him the photos and he
nodded, saying something about how he’d see her later at the party. But she never asked him where his home really was. She still has those photos zipped into a compartment in her red leather suitcase, shoved under the bed.

She hears the key in the lock and turns to see Daniel burst in with shining eyes. He runs to Amelia and takes her hands. A coating of seeds is stuck to her moist palms.

“How many times have I told you those birds are diseased? We have to think of the baby now. And God knows what you could have picked up overseas. Let’s not make things any worse.” Softly he brushes her hands with his. Tiny seeds cascade to the orange flecked linoleum floor and rolled under the table and stove, the sink. “But listen, any day now he’ll be released, I know it!” Daniel cries out squeezing her hands, the remaining seeds pricking into her skin.

“Who?” she smiles with him as a reflex, her chapped lips cracking.

“Hurricane Carter. This outrage is going to end soon. The world is beginning its tilt again in our favor, righting itself. It moves slowly sure, but it moves nonetheless.”

Amelia tries to hold in a sigh, eyes shifting across the seeds scattered at her feet. Daniel has been collecting every newspaper and magazine that contains information about the charges against Rubin Carter, writing letters to Carter’s lawyers on a daily basis. He rants about race and justice and suffering and a world where no human being has a shred of agency. He rambles on, his voice wavering
up and up and up, louder and louder, the ascent of a rickety carnival car.

Sometimes he’d hit a stride and even out up high there with a red face and a shaking fist, then all at once start to get quieter, and eventually begin to weep.

“What makes you say that?” Amelia asks.

“It’s just a feeling. Yesterday it felt hopeless. I was convinced that an innocent man would be imprisoned forever. All around me, everything was cold. Did you ever notice the way people avert their eyes here? No one wants to look at anyone else. It’s so desolate. It sort of wraps around you all day and then everything takes on that silver tone. That emotionless quality streaked with anger.”

“But you said that was yesterday. Today you said—”

“Yes. Today. Today I decided to look up as I walked through the park. Usually I look in front of me and I see these people with nowhere to go. And their rotting teeth, and their feet swollen so they can’t tie their shoes. I always notice the injured squirrels. No one else seems to see them, but I do. Some of them have scars you know, and molting tails. Then there’s the birds. Pigeons. They barely fly! They just hobble around making that noise like something is building inside of them, a complaint, a plea, it’s more than that, though. Anyway, today I couldn’t stand it. I was waiting at the edge of the park, knowing I had to walk through but I couldn’t stand it.”

“Well, go around next time.”
“Follow the story,” Daniel looks at her and his eyes dance.

“Right. Sorry.”

“So there I was, right? And something in me just said, look up. Look into the trees, look into the sky. Strain yourself, push. You’ll see things you’ve never seen. And I did. I looked up into the intersecting branches of the oaks as they reached for one another. The paper birches and their archway and the rustle of the yellow and green leaves. They were waving at me and light was poking through them, filtering onto my face, shining into my eyes. It was a sign from God. Amelia, I couldn’t even hear the damn pigeons. There was only me, and the trees, and the white of the early sky and I was guided through the park. Things are righting themselves. You’re back. We’re having a baby. And now Rubin Carter will be set free. Let the blood come from someone else’s hands for a change, eh!”

Amelia falls silent, looking out the window where now there are no birds, merely the husks of the seeds she’s thrown rocking in the breeze.

“You okay, honey?” With his rough fingertips Daniel lifts face to his.

“I don’t think so.”

“Come with me.” He says, grabbing her hand and pulling her out the door.

When they are on the sidewalk he leads her toward the corner and turns onto Seventh. The park is before them at the end of the block. Townhouses line either side of the street, gated cobblestone pathways appear here and there along the way. Small trees grow painfully into the circular wrought iron fences that
enclosed them, swallowing pieces of the black metal into their bark. The couple weaves through the people returning home from work, mostly men, loosening their ties and laughing easily in clusters, others darting by alone, heads down.

“Daniel, I don’t feel like being outside.”

“Just trust me. This will make you feel better.” He squeezes her hand and speeds up, and she stumbles after him. As they reach the mouth of the park, Daniel moves to stand behind Amelia, and gestures upward. The trees that surrounded them arch at their tips into a canopy of thin branches and shuddering leaves. Sharp beams of light shoot through the tenuous gaps that shift and change shape, and Amelia feels her heart begin to slow.

“See that light? It’s almost blinding. Remarkable, how it fights its way through the leaves. We aren’t alone here. We’re not the ones running this show. I know you’re still not back here. I mean, here. I’m no dummy. But you are home, whether you know it or not. They don’t have trees like this in the jungle. I’m just trying to tell you it’ll be okay.”

Amelia looks at him, unsmiling. She feels empty but she isn’t numb, not at this very moment, and so she holds the moment close, looking up into the trees again as Daniel holds her.
Seventeen

It’s the morning of the Challenger launch and Amelia feels somehow unprepared. Reagan had announced NASA’s intention to begin the teacher in space program two years earlier, and immediately Amelia had become enthralled with the idea of this wholesome, brave woman, Christa McAuliffe, careening through the atmosphere at twenty-five thousand miles per hour in a giant bullet spewing fire from its end. She imagines that perhaps just days before, McAuliffe was grading tests, conferencing with parents, banging erasers behind the school in Concord, New Hampshire where she taught high school social studies. But no, she was in training for months, maybe a year before the launch, so her days were probably spent sweating in airless spaces, accelerating and vomiting, heart thrumming until she thought it might explode. Amelia wonders if the school teacher was nervous in the presence of all of these men who’d already gone into space. She’d had been the woman among men like this, after all, and she knows it’s not about having had the same experience, but about being quiet, being able to absorb and intuit what you haven’t been allowed to go through.

It’s eleven o’clock and she is sitting on the floor in front of the television. Lift off was scheduled for 9:38 am, but an overnight freeze on the launch pad causes a delay. Amelia doesn’t mind, it gives her more time to focus on her
anticipation. She wants to draw it out, this moment. She can take this experience, wring it of all its meaning, make it something solid and cool she can hold inside when she is in bed tonight. Inside she is soaring and thankful for it. In the twenty-seven days since her son died she has not let herself feel a thing except for when she hasn’t been able to help it. The horror would seize her and she would go into her large closet among her hanging clothes and sob, muffling her face with the fabric that surrounded her in the moments when her grief was audible. It shames her to hear herself cry.

She is excited for McAuliffe and proud of her, and guilty for being interested in something, for looking forward when her son will never open his eyes again. Daniel is something of a cannon she thinks, great heavy outbursts of grief come and go between fits of frightening weakness, where his voice isn’t heard and tears leak from his eyes and his mouth is so limp that it can’t hold the cigarettes he’s been chain-smoking. In sharp relief from his impulsive outpouring is his wife, who carefully packed and labeled boxes of her son’s belongings and brought them up to the attic, donated other boxes of clothes and books and records to Goodwill. Lucy snatched up from a box his camouflage jacket, stained with rust hued chewing tobacco spit on the front. She hid it at the foot of her bed under the blankets. She pushes her feet against it as she falls asleep at night.

Amelia has been feeding her family complicated meals for the past three days, stirring conversation about the Challenger, breaking through the quiet with
the hammer of her voice. She has been polishing the silver and standing on chairs
to take down the cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling, something the cleaning
lady would normally do, but Amelia wants only Rainey's in their space now,
because the pity in the eyes of others makes her feel violent.

Eight minutes past eleven. Now they are fixing a faulty fire alarm on
board but they are reassuring the crowd and the viewers at home. It won’t be long
now. Amelia looks at the hundreds of spectators, so many children among them,
who sit on the bleachers with huge poster board signs cheering the teacher on.
NASA hats and buttons and tee shirts and smiles and none of them can sit still.
The camera cuts again and again to McAuliffe’s parents; a well-dressed attractive
couple who clutch each other and smile. They are so proud, Amelia can see. It
seems to have intoxicated them, but the camera shows them just long enough that
Amelia can also see something else in the way they cling to one another with lips
spread wide and frozen. It’s fear. How could it be anything else? McAuliffe’s
mother keeps placing her head on her husband’s chest and picking it up again, as
if to get her bearings over and over, are we really here? And her father tilts his
head up high enough to see the top of the ship from under his hat, waiting.

As she waits with them Amelia thinks of a gunner, Peyton, who took her
to the only off base party she attended in Vietnam. She and a handful of nurses
had been snuck into the back of a supply truck and there Peyton and his friend
Graves threw blankets over the women and drove off the compound.
The in ground pool at the Phu Lo base was lined with plastic instead of tile or concrete, and was three feet deep. Large slow mosquitoes hovered over the surface of the water, while hundreds of other insects, long since expired and water logged, lay twisted in its light ripples. Amelia waded into the water in her underwear and a green army t shirt, and after four beers grabbed Peyton’s dog tags and pulled at them until he relented, laughing, and put them around her neck. He dunked her under the water and pulled her up again and then she was laughing, finally not wishing she had her camera, just taking it all in with her own eyes: the lukewarm water that in the hundred and fifteen degree heat felt like sweat, the easy voices of the men that talked just as they would talk if there were no women present, because they weren’t at home, because they were strangers to the surroundings and so by contrast not to each other. Peyton leaned on the wall next to Amelia in the pool and handed her a joint. Above them the thick humid air hid the stars behind a veil so it looked to Amelia like they were seeing the sky through tears. Their fingers brushed against each other as they passed the joint between them.

“They’re going to put a man on the moon. Jesus. It’s only just starting.” Peyton said blowing out a cloud of sweet smoke.

“What is,” Amelia asked, and then before he could answer, said, “No, it’s always been going on. There’s no way to stop it, and actually I don’t know that it
ever began, the way we think things begin. I think one day it wasn’t like this, and the next it was.”

Peyton threw the joint into the pool and wiped the dead bugs off of his arms. He heaved himself out of the water then reached down to help Amelia out. He handed her a towel. “Nice legs. How come you’re always behind the camera, eh?”

“And we were having such a nice evening. Pig.” She smiles and her teeth glitter in the haze.

Later on during the drive back to the base Peyton asked Graves to stop the truck so he could take a leak. He disappeared into the bushes and stepped on a mine. The explosion made the nurses scream, and it took two hours and half a bottle of Wild Turkey to calm Graves down enough to drive back to the base. Amelia stopped going to parties after that night, but now couldn’t remember if it was because of Peyton, or because she found out that she was pregnant. She took fourteen hundred new pictures in two weeks, and flew home.

Eleven-thirty-eight and the Challenger lifts off among screams and applause, then quiet. The reporter begins talking to fill the silence as the ship curves into the sky. He talks about how this is the first time they are using pad 39 B since the days of the Apollo, how it is a cold day in Florida. He recounts the frozen launch pad, the delay. And the silence resumes. Amelia thinks this man can’t handle it, that something new is happening. People talk to fill that space,
they wear buttons and hold signs and cheer and rest on the chests of their partners and stare as each future minute becomes the present one, and then becomes the one that has just passed.

The reporter explains that the icicles that formed on the ship overnight may have damaged the protective coating used during re-entry. “We don’t know what the effect might be just yet; the astronauts will take a look later on in the mission.” He pauses between the radio transmissions from Kennedy, translating the NASA jargon for his viewers. The radio sends a man’s grainy voice into Amelia’s living room, “Challenger, go at throttle up.” And she watches as the shuttle climbs, barely hearing the competing voices of the man at Kennedy, the one reporting from the ship, and the one behind the news desk. The Challenger looks smooth and sure; powerful, and Amelia is in awe. For a moment she thinks of her daughter, watching this in her first grade classroom. She wonders what Lucy will think of it, and she wants to ask her when the girl gets home from school. She’ll wait for her at the bus stop at the end of their long driveway, she decides. All at once on the television screen the shuttle jerks and almost disappears beneath a burst of bright white steam and smoke, and within the tumbling orb of gas there is the orange flare of fire. Thin traces of spark quiver like tinsel and fall through the air and the smoke splits into two paths that travel downward in different directions and the reporter cries out, “My God….there’s been explosion. This—this is not standard. This is not something that’s been
planned of course.” There is a delay in the radio feed so that underneath the reporter’s frantic voice the man at Kennedy is calmly affirming the speed and altitude at which the ship had been travelling moments before.

Now there is only a massive cloud with tendrils of smoke hanging from it, and the man at Kennedy speaking quickly and quietly, and the reporter musing emotionally about whether the shuttle can jettison one rocket booster to get the crew back to the base, and saying out loud, because maybe he has to, repeating it, “I can’t see the ship. I can no longer see the shuttle.” The camera continues to follow the smoke that dribbles down the flat blue sky in rivulets like white water. The radio voice cuts the reporter off, saying, “Flight controllers here looking very carefully at the situation….obviously a major malfunction.”

Amelia sits frozen with her knees drawn up to her chest, not realizing that her hand has come up to cover her mouth, not feeling the tears streaming down her face, dripping down her neck, disappearing into the collar of her shirt. She is holding her breath without thinking about it, but a part of her wants to hold it long enough so that she will pass out. She doesn’t want to witness this.

Launch control confirms “the vehicle has exploded,” and a recovery attempt is stressed, but Amelia knows it will be useless. They are all dead. Christa McAuliffe is dead. As Amelia has this thought McAuliffe’s parents flash onto the screen. Her mother’s mouth is quivering and her head wrenches back and forth, up at the smoke and then back to the tower, as if someone can tell her
then and there exactly what has happened to her daughter, whether she has exploded or vaporized or fallen whole into the water. Her father stands very still, staring upward and squinting, his hand resting weakly on his wife’s shoulder.

Amelia leans over and switches off the television knob. She pulls herself up and is suddenly conscious of the ache in her shoulders, her thighs, the small of her back. She realizes it takes effort to stand up straight, to walk up the stairs to her room, to open the door to her closet. Her breath is loud and she imagines it is not her breath but her blood pumping into her ears. She shuts the door to her closet behind her and squeezes in next to the black dress she wore to Grady’s funeral. It’s been freshly cleaned, and the plastic wrapping sticks to her wet salty face. By her feet, stuffed into the corner of the closet is the red leather suitcase she took to Vietnam, and hasn’t used since. She bends to pull it out and runs her hand over the layer of dust on the top of it, unzips the loose worn zipper. Amelia begins grabbing things that hang from the rod by her head and pulling them down. The hangers clang together. She darts to her dresser and opens the drawers, sweeping out her underwear, tangled bras, balled socks and they fall into the open suitcase. She slips three credit cards out of the wallet Daniel gave her for her birthday, placing them into her pocket. The wallet itself she leaves open on the dresser, a small picture of the family still behind soft scratched plastic inside it. She doesn’t leave a note, but she knows the drawers she left open, the crooked, swinging hangers, the missing checkbook and credit cards are enough. Just as she
turns to leave she stops, opening the pewter jewelry box resting on the bureau. She pulls out a bit of silvery pink gauze in the shape of a fish’s scale, only it’s longer, and softer because a feather has been stuck to it. Even now she doesn’t know what she is doing. It’s not that she thinks to herself, “Just a rest, a break and I’ll be back.” It’s not that she plans never to return. She doesn’t have a plan. She doesn’t know a thing about the future. She never has. Amelia turns once again, suitcase in hand, to leave the room. In her other hand is the silvery pink gauze, its end floating against her arm.
Eighteen

Amelia hadn't asked for the pills, but even still she felt guilty. She'd been afraid to nurse the baby, yet she was determined to do it. There was something disorienting about the end of a pregnancy. All those months with someone all the time, every moment. Sharing every thought, somehow, because any space is not your own, anything you produce, you split with another. And here was a way to remain close, holding the baby to you, cleaving yourself as a part of you dribbled from your swollen breast, into the mouth of your hungry child.

When Grady was born Daniel had looked at him, stroking his head and whispering, "Flesh of my flesh. Blood of my blood. I know what that means now, Millie. Because of you, I know."

She hadn't asked for them, no, but the nurse had handed Amelia the pills and said, "Take these." She should have known. After she swallowed the nurse turned back from swaddling the baby in his plastic box and said, "Now you'll dry right up. They're a nuisance the way they drip. And they hurt."

"My breasts? These were pills to stop the milk?"

"Oh honey, you don't want to feed him that way. What are we, barbarians? The formula has everything he needs. Trust me, it's much better."

"I'm a nurse, you know."

"Well, then you know what I mean, Sweetheart."
Amelia looks at the nurse, much older than herself, as she is handed her son and a bottle to shove between his lips. "I was in Vietnam."

The nurse pretends not to hear her, smoothing the covers over Amelia's bare thighs, laying a fresh gown over the side of the bed.

"When you're ready to shower, you can buzz me, Dear."

Amelia looks at the clock and sees that she has two hours with Grady before Daniel will arrive after work. Her son sucks eagerly at the bottle and she runs her thumb over his tiny brow, furrowed with the effort of feeding himself. Every nurse who's been in and out to change the baby, or take his temperature, listen to his heart has commented on how alert he is. How wide his eyes are, how little he seems to sleep. "Like his father," Amelia always says to them, but at night, between feedings, she lays awake in bed, just as Daniel does. She's past wondering when she'll sleep again. The truth is she never was a heavy sleeper, even before. It occurs to her that her father and mother rarely slept well either, and she pushes away the thought that we pass these things onto our children. She doesn't realize she's been thinking aloud, whispering things to her son as they drift through her, until a new nurse enters, carrying two ice packs and a flesh colored Ace bandage.

"Here, honey. Let me wrap your breasts." She reaches to take Grady from her, and Amelia holds him closer.

"He hasn’t burped."  

134
The nurse smiles, "Honey, I'm well-versed in burping babies. I've been at it a while now."

"Well, I haven't. And I'd like to do it myself."

"If you don't let me wrap those breasts you'll be sorry later. I don't think any woman who's just had a baby and is stitched up to the gills should be opting for extra pain."

Amelia stands slowly and though she feels her knees buckle, she makes her way past the nurse and places Grady in his bed. She turns back and lifts her gown over her head.

"That's a good girl. Don't worry, once we ice you and those pills start their work you'll start to feel like yourself again. Pretty soon someone will come to take your son to the nursery for the night and you can sleep. You need that. You don't know it yet; you've still got the glow. But soon enough, you'll wish all of us were living with you."

"Not likely." Amelia thought. She found these nurses to be smug and pushy, two things she'd never been when she cared for people. What was it about babies that made other women feel compelled to tell you what to do? We're all just people. All these babies, they really aren't babies. They're just people in a moment in time. Amelia can feel it. She'll blink and this baby will be gone without a trace.
The nurse guides Amelia's hands to hold an ice pack on each of her breasts while she circles the bandage around her. Amelia can smell her breath and hair, and she remembers nursing with a tingle of covetous sympathy; the long shifts, the exhaustion, the depleting importance of personal grooming, if not hygiene.

"Sonia said you did a tour in Vietnam. That true?"

"Not a whole tour. Came home to have this one." Amelia looks over at her sleeping son, gestures toward him with her chin.

"How long were you there?"

"Not long enough." Amelia's own answer startles her but the nurse doesn't seem to find her response strange.

"I haven't been here long. I got picked up because there was a nurse went over there, just before they put on the hiring freeze. I got lucky, I guess. Till she comes back."

"Maybe she'll never come back. Then you'll be really lucky, won't you?"

The nurse looks at Amelia; she's just heard the dangerous tone in her voice. She quickly finishes wrapping her, but now her hands are shaking. She's young, but so is this new mother. But this new mother, she's angry. She's full of rage. And the rage turns to fear when it hits the tips of her fingers, or the soles of her feet, or timbre of her voice. It all just turns to fear; like a kind of terrible magic. She can't be angry here. She can't be angry anywhere, and especially not now. Not as a mother. Mothers get frustrated, they get fed up; they get burnt out.
They don't get angry. Not like this mother wants to. She wants to let it out raw and red and searing everything in its path with such heat that it all turns to dust. Hot gray dust swirling in the air. Rage like that is never ending.

The nurse turns, leaving without a word; and Amelia feels now her misstep. She shouldn't have said anything. More and more she thinks that, how she should have just kept quiet. It's gotten harder to do.

That night Grady screams in the nursery and after a while the nurses give up soothing him; he just won't stop. They figure it's gas, since the young nurse who wrapped her breasts says his shell shocked mother never burped him. It'll pass, just like anything else, they all joke over the sound of his cries.
1986

Nineteen

Daniel is determined to take down all of the Christmas lights, the holly wreath he hung, the preschool ornaments made by his son and daughter, clay silver bells and clothespin Virgin Marys, tinfoil candy canes, the tinsel and the tree, before New Year’s. He’d forced himself to decorate the house, he’d bought cookies for Santa and put them by the fireplace with a fixed smile, a practiced excitement, because he wanted to see the glee return to his daughter’s face. He’d done well that year, 1986 was a good year for the market, and it showed in the gifts under the tree Christmas morning. Now, two days later, he stands on the frozen driveway bringing an axe down on the naked tree, still firm and green and very much alive. He’ll pile up the wood and dry it out and burn it to keep the wintertime cheerful inside.

It’s been almost a year since Grady died, since Lucy’s mother left, but sometimes her father still says things like, “I can’t believe we are still here. After all of it, I mean, here we are. I think we’re doing pretty damn good, eh Lu?” Then he looks at his hands, as if that is confirmation that his body remains where it has always been.

“Yeah, Daddy. Everything’s good.” Lucy looks at her own hands too, not because she’s not sure if they, she and her father, are really here, but because she’s learned that it’s a good way to check on how she’s feeling. Her hands get
cold when she’s very hungry, which is often because a lot of meal time is spent in a daze after which she realizes she hasn’t eaten more than a few bites. When she is angry her hands tremble, when she’s afraid they clench into fists. If they get hot and red and swollen she is happy. Her hands have become the only sure way for her to know what is inside of her.

Daniel is carrying Christmas tree firewood to the patio and stacking it in a tarp covered pile under the window. Lucy lifts the window and stormer underneath it and brings her fingers down on his bent head, tickling him. The air is so cold her hand immediately goes numb.

“Hey, there’s a mouse on my head!” Daniel cries out, grabbing his daughter’s arm and pretending to devour it.

She shrieks, delighted that lately it’s been very easy for her to keep him happy. Maybe she’s finally figured out the secret. It’s all in her hands; it must be that he loves her that much. It doesn’t matter that even when he smiles now his eyes drag down at their corners, or that in the morning she can hear him sigh as he walks down the stairs, “Another day. Another day another day another day.”

What matters is that last weekend he built a snow fort, actually took down the big shovel that hangs on a hook in the garage, actually took a stick and carved out brick shapes in the packed snow around the fort. Actually bought a Polaroid and took pictures of his daughter’s head sticking out of the fort, her hair so light in the
Now he picks his head up to look at her, and his breath is sour from stale cigarettes and coffee. “Since I’m taking this week off let’s make the most of it. There’s a movie that just came out and I want to see it. We can go tonight.” He stands to come in through the patio door, “Get me the paper.”

“Are we going to see An American Tail?”

“No honey it’s Daddy’s turn to pick one. We’re going to see Platoon.”

“But the mouse movie won’t be out much longer!”

“We can get it on tape in a few months. Don’t we always talk about you learning to be patient?”

“I’m trying to be patient Daddy, but I just want to see the mouse movie.”

“Don’t try, just do it.” His voice is suddenly sharp and his daughter falls silent. There is a pause and he puts the newspaper down.

“Look, I think you are mature enough to handle hearing something. Am I right?”

Lucy nods, feeling the hair on her arms stand on end.

“I want to see this movie because I’m trying to understand. I’m hoping it will tell me why your mother isn’t here anymore. You know those pictures in her book? Those pictures are of the things that are in this movie.”
Lucy has looked at the pictures many times since her mother left. Her father takes the book down from the shelf every now and then and sits her in his lap, talking to her about the things they see in it. Some of the pictures look to Lucy like something she should not be seeing. They are beyond what she can understand but that is not what makes them forbidden.

“And also maybe, I think she might go see this movie. Your mother might be there, if she’s still nearby, and maybe we can try and get her to come home. Doesn’t that sound good?” Daniel looks his daughter in the eye with a tired smile.

Lucy’s first instinct is to answer, yes of course, but when she really thinks about her mother being back something inside her can’t make sense of it. Mommy left because she is broken, Daddy said that day in January. But how do they know she is fixed by now? Still underneath all of this Lucy burns to see her mother. To touch her face and be cradled in her bony strong frame. To hear her under water voice, the way she remembers it the last time her mother spoke to her.

She was standing at the front door with her Rainbow Brite lunch box, her book bag on her back, a puffy coat and hat and scarf half-obsuring her face. Amelia stood behind her, bending to turn her daughter gently by the shoulders and talk to her. “Lu today is the day! The teacher in space. Can you imagine if Miss Dickson went to space?”

Lucy couldn’t.
“Aren’t you excited?”

“Yeah.” But more than anything the idea of space, of being so far away, alone in blackness, without even the familiar feeling of a weighted world to keep you secure, was terrifying to her, and still is.

“Good, you should be. I’ll see you when you get home and we can talk about it. Love you, Lu. Have a good day at school.”

That was it. *Have a good day at school.* A mechanical statement, a command parents make as part of a daily attempt to force their children to be happy, or at least content, because they can’t bear it any other way. And for the most part it had been a good day, except when the Challenger exploded.

“Okay Daddy. Is it a cartoon?” Platoon, cartoon—she is trying to make a connection.

“No Baby, it’s not a cartoon. But you can bring your coloring book with you in case you get bored. And I’ll get you any kind of candy you want.”

“Do they have cotton candy?” Lucy is thinking about the day her father took her to see the Georgetown Hoyas play the Villanova Wildcats and bought her three cotton candies in a row. That was a good day.

“I don’t think so. But they have all kinds of other stuff.”

As soon as they pull up to the Anthony Wayne movie theatre Lucy cranes her neck out the window to look at the people scattered in a loose line in front of the box office. Is one of them her mother? But no one was.
They have to pause outside the theatre after they buy the tickets so that Daniel can smoke a cigarette. Lucy sees him looking around, just the way she is, for her mother.

“I don’t think Mommy is here.” Lucy whispers, looking up at him.

He crushes his cigarette out under his loafer and brushes the stray ashes from his suede coat. “Let’s go inside, Lu.”

Daniel buys her Pepsi and popcorn and Mike and Ikes, and the little girl cradles her treats in her arms. They walk down the dark aisle to find a seat before the huge screen that crackles between beginning credits. The song that plays is sad and sonorous, and as they sit Lucy sees that her father is grimacing under the weight of the music, the chop of the helicopter, the moist green of the jungle that spreads out before them. Lucy once again scans the seats for her mother, but comes up only with men her parents’ age, and maybe their wives or girlfriends, and some teenage boys. She is the only child present, and her mother is not there. She doesn’t wonder where her mother is, because the question is too expansive. The world apart from her small sphere of Devon, Pennsylvania seems impossibly large, like something that could swallow her mother whole. She may as well be on the moon.

Lucy quickly gets bored with the movie and tugs her father’s sleeve, asking for the coloring book he brought for her. He pulls it out from inside his
jacket, his eyes fixed on the screen. “I don’t think there are any women in this movie,” he says.