

“The Trash Painting: An Anthology of Short Fiction on the Theme of Urban Alienation”

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Degree in Creative Writing

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Preface

You wouldn't know Linden, New Jersey, from any other township in the region. It's a fairly innocuous place, neither especially crowded nor especially empty. Linden is situated approximately between the Appalachian highlands of north Jersey, and the pine-barrens to the south, and it can't decide which geographical region it wants to be a part of. The town is spangled with tall trees (hence the name) and it likes to keep to itself, like the small mountain towns in the north; but it's held together by convex, sidewalk-less streets, a wide open downtown filled with new shops in old buildings, like the towns in the south of the state. Linden is a place of beautiful indecision. I grew up in Linden, New Jersey, and that experience formed the inspiration for the following anthology of stories.

These stories are connected by a loose commonality about social interaction. All the stories are set in or around the fictional city of Newlocke, New Jersey, a place of constant interpersonal unease. Like Linden, Newlocke is a city of contradiction. Exteriors are bustling with noise, and interiors are leaden with silence. No two streets look, sound, or smell identical. It is a crowded place, but it is also deeply lonely. Linden, and thus Newlocke, put their inhabitants in a state of uncomfortable self-awareness. With so many people around at all times, and no one to talk to, the characters in the stories retreat into themselves. They ponder on themselves, they shuffle through fears and regrets and attachments, sometimes they come to realizations and sometimes they bury themselves in ignorance. In writing these stories, I sought to capture that same feeling of being held hostage by one's own thoughts, amidst all that widespread silence. I wanted to write a selection of stories that embody how it feels to be alone, in all the forms that it can take.

The characters are contradictions, too. Their lonesomeness gives them an intensity of thought but an inarticulateness of word. They hold themselves to high, deontic expectations, of which they inevitably fall short. And in their neurotic state, they hurt the people they love, and themselves; in "His Sister's Apartment," a man's unresolved regrets drive him to lash out against the only person who would help him; in "Nor'easter," a woman finds herself unable to voice her fear of the future to her partner, instead wanting to keep the precarious status quo. The result of a lifetime of expectations for dead-silence is a state of rage and anxiety that one has been conditioned not to express. So, the main characters of all six stories embody an emotional response to this conditioning: bitterness, social phobia, detachment, avolition, obsession, and passivity. Unable to express their own private tumult, the characters express themselves in destructive ways. Between their own incommunicative states, their unfulfilling lives, their ill-equipment to handle the troubles of others, the characters have no one to turn to but themselves, until their silence eventually begets more of itself.

I sought to create a cycle of stories that center around the feeling of loneliness, even in overtly social settings. Loneliness is, appropriately, unique to anyone who experiences it, and the variety of the stories reflect that. In times of distress, some characters lash out in anger, others regress into flat-affect. Some drive themselves toward their own isolation, but others still are undone by cosmically bad luck. The feelings of loneliness in the story is inevitable for the characters, and for many of them it is their baseline state of being, which they think about only inasmuch as the constant presence of other people forces them to. Loneliness is not some social perversion, it's a response to the difficulty of true, meaningful connection with those around oneself, and the inherent painfulness of opening oneself to someone else. No one wants to be the first to be speak—I certainly never do.

Newlocke is a difficult setting to realize in a physical sense because it's intended to be more than physical. It's both a companion to the characters, and a constant reminder of their own insignificance. Specificity and unquity are not ideas that often cross the characters' minds, so those features are not as much part of their city either. Linden could be anywhere, as could Newlocke. The city is a blunting place, with neither past nor future but inescapable present. The city of Newlocke is the externalized form of the characters' mental ensnarement. They are trapped in Newlocke, just as they are trapped within themselves. Still, Newlocke is a place of beauty. Its landscape enthralls the characters, but they cannot appreciate its splendor. In "Kidney," Syd Urman watches "the mirrored puddles on the street, that cast the city in an inverted double," but it only reminds him of his own duplicity (37). Gerald Hoy, a visitor to the

city in “The Night-Train to Newlocke,” observes its scale and perspectives when viewed through the speeding window of a train, but Gerald’s overwhelming guilt turns the lights into a “fanged visage of a cityscape” outside (59). The beauty is just outside the characters’ grasps, as both a prison and an escape. The city’s elegance serves as a lingering glint of existential joy for the characters, which they always disregard.

The characters are frequently wrong about the city of Newlocke. A recurring comment made throughout the stories is that Newlocke rarely gets any extreme weather conditions, neither heavy rain, nor snowfall, nor hurricanes. This aspect of Newlocke is directly lifted from the city of its inspiration. Linden does not get heavy snow like the mountains nearby do, and it does not get coastal wind like the southern part of the state. Linden is temperate— boringly so. For Newlocke, however, this meteorological anomaly is a myth. Characters will say that the city never sees inclement weather, but they are always proven wrong. Outside the city, outside the characters’ conceptions of it and themselves, the world keeps moving and changing, and there is hope to be found in the fact that not everything is as it seems. Tragedy rests in how the characters cannot see this hope, this possibility for existential joy, even the presence of people who love them, because they are so caught up in their own minds for fear of how other people perceive them. They become solipsistic, with each action and thought thoroughly detailed and catalogued.

Perception is another connecting thread in the stories. Living among such density of people leads one to question how they are perceived, and leads further into a state of self-imposed conformity. All the characters have are their own perceptions, always running like a restless generator keeping their brains alight. They dare not speak to anyone else, so they just perceive. Perceptions, of course, are misleading. No one’s entire life will be immediately obvious— sometimes because they too are practicing the same insecure self-questioning of how they are seen. Yet the characters in the stories obsess over perception, of themselves, of others, sometimes wishing for an escape from sensation, that never comes so long as one is still alive. They are attracted to regularity, status quo, and the nonsensical ideal of some kind of normalcy; the values instilled in them by an impersonal and confining cityscape.

“Twos and Fives” was the starting point of the entire collection, from which the themes explored in the other stories branch off from. The first iteration of “Twos and Fives” was a short story I had written for a high school writing class, but which shared little in common with this version, aside from the title, character names, and setting (which was, in turn, based on the Union County Fair in New Jersey that I frequented almost every summer as a child— its rattly rides and the plentiful young couples there). The story contained in this collection is a complete redux. More specifically, writing the character of Henri Lomax was the inspirational origin of the main themes of my entire work. I began writing the story as an image of a malfunctioning and abusive relationship, based around the inability for one person to wholly know another, even someone so intimately close to them as a romantic partner. From there, I realized the universality of that concept, that it is not isolated to romantic couples but to all people; when one is aware of their own detachment from everyone around them, when they are aware of the solipsistic limits of their own awareness, then it becomes difficult to reconcile being with someone else as a life-partner. From there comes Henri’s habit of counting her surroundings. She tries to translate the world into numbers, to surround herself with simple, reliable forms, rather than face the absurdity of her own existence.

“His Sister’s Apartment” was the first story that I wrote specifically for this collection. Its starting point was the idea of taboo, and particularly about the depraved sense of intimacy that it comes with. From there, I sought to write a story exploring how miserable a character must become in order to desire that sort of intimacy, and found that it, too, could be a result of loneliness. Ambrose in the story hates his own existence. He sees his life continuing on after the death of his partner as futile, as he has lost his only source of belonging and companionship. The only connection he still has is with his estranged sister, whom he cannot adequately express himself to, and with that, his loneliness and avolition only feed each other. That “horror of wholeness,” being trapped in one’s own body without true desire, is also present in the characters’ names (17). Ambrose and Amicia both refer to one another by the same nickname— the conjugate of the verb “to be:” “Am.” With nothing else to do but face his own being, Ambrose sinks into rage and cravenness.

“Kidney” is an inversion of many of the core concepts of the other stories. I wanted to write a character of more activity and more intense and pointed desire; so intense, in fact, that he destroys himself and his relationship in its pursuit. Like Henri, Ambrose, and later Gerald and Vivian, Syd Ulman hides something from those around him, in his obsessive motivation to donate his kidney and seemingly make some difference in the lives of others. Syd, having no meaningful connection with anyone but Janis, yet he wants that sort of connection passionately. In doing so, he neglects Janis’s own love for him, mistaking her concern and curiosity for control and prying. He does so because his life experience has afforded him no opportunity to see that variety of concern or curiosity expressed in anyone else.

“Nor’easter,” named after the contractional name for a winter storm on the northeastern American coast, is a story of a single moment. The events of the story take place over about as much time as it takes to read it, but it provides a microscopic view of a relationship in mutual incommunicativeness. The unnamed characters both have fears, desires, observations aplenty, but they remain passive. They both defer the conversation to the other, suspending each other in silence and inaction, despite the woman’s worries and the man’s selfishness. While the storm approaches outside, while the woman’s mother portends disaster, neither of the two primary characters do anything, out of fear of upsetting the other, and the house remains silent. At the end of the story, the silence spreads over all of Newlocke, signifying that this couple shares their non-verbality with countless more couples, all across the city. The exact mental processes of someone navigating this silence is demonstrated in the woman’s explanation of the optics of color: “‘The way it works is,’ she said, ‘the color that you see something as, is actually the one wavelength of light that it can’t absorb. So it reflects it back out.’” Illustrating with her hands, she spread out her fingers in front of his face, collecting his red hair and her shortened fingernails into one single optic. ‘Really,’ she concluded, ‘the color that you see is the color that something isn’t.’” (64) Just as perceptible color is actually reflection and not innateness, any form of expression is always tailored to the listener, and rarely the truth according to the speaker. Both nameless participants in this relationship lose any concept of truth, for continually lying to one another in the hopes of bringing the other some modicum of happiness.

“The Night-Train to Newlocke” is built upon a detailed description of the experience aboard a New Jersey Transit commuter train. The nylon seats, finger-blotted windows, and swift passing views of industrial decay and looming cityscapes all come from my own frequent rides on those kinds of trains, particularly at nights, when the trains are usually silent for lack of conversation. “The Night-Train to Newlocke” is another story of sibling disparity, although I sought to write primarily about the bitterness that results from that estrangement. Gerald externalizes his own resentment of his brother, and allows it to remold him into a figure of spite and misery. In attempting to make amends with his niece, Gerald only comes to see how this path he had followed had warped his entire life, and with so much guilt bearing down upon him, he refuses any redemption.

“The Trash Painting” is the final story that I composed for the collection, and it’s the centerpiece of my work. I intended to give further character to the entire city of Newlocke, to bring it forth as an imposing presence haunting Vivian. The story is a journey of loneliness and social phobia, focused attentively on Vivian’s anxiety when faced with interpersonal interaction. More globally, I wanted to write about a relationship between a person and a work of art, and how their attempts to immure themselves within an escapist fantasy only make their loneliness more acute. The riptide of anxieties that Vivian catches herself in represents a fear that I personally encounter, of one’s own efforts to interact with others positively only results in causing some accidental and freakish emotional harm. Vivian’s self-deprecation is also an extension of this fear of hers, and serves also as a characterization for the whole city of Newlocke; a place where things don’t happen. There are many such cities, and Linden is one of them. Yet despite their multitude, that thought of being in a place where nothing transpires is still a pervasive one. It, like most anxieties, doesn’t heel to any reason, although perhaps being told that others have felt it too is some small comfort.

The literary influences of the stories are the anthologies *Dubliners* by James Joyce, *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, and *Trout Fishing in America* by Richard Brautigan. *Dubliners* was a direct inspiration for the form of my story collection, as a series of separate narratives sharing setting and

common themes. I was interested in how Joyce's titular Dubliners are trapped within their city, whether literally or metaphorically. They have their preconceptions broken by seemingly small interactions, sometimes with complete strangers, showing the weighty power that any human interaction holds. For my stories, I chose to depart in a different direction, and explored the effect of non-interaction and the power of false perceptions. *Winesburg Ohio* is a similarly structured collection, following the growth and maturation of its primary character through his life in his hometown, with finely detailed recurring motifs tracking the changes. *Trout Fishing in America* is primarily a stylistic influence, with its intentionally obscure storyline and prose dotted with non-literal similes that instill a sense of hazy isolation. My stories seek to explore that same feeling that Brautigan peerlessly expresses.

The intention of these stories is to recreate the feeling of loneliness, and the aspects of life in a setting where one must always be among others. They are stories of people reacting to the constant contradictions and expectations of sociality, losing their sense of self in a place that expects conformity and quiet. The stories in this collection are often bleak, but they are not intended to be moralistic cautionary tales. Instead, read them as an opportunity to indulge in feelings of hopelessness, to understand how it feels so that one doesn't need to feel it again.

For Brittany

Twos and Fives

(Summer)

The late-hour sun slid down across the cooling summertime haze, like a single great tear, shed from a reluctant blue-and-red eye. Looking upward, Henri Lomax tried to envision what the light between the clouds was like. The clouds' shapes were indecisive, and their shadowed undersides creased the sky like a gargantuan cosmic fingerprint, but that was only what they looked like. But what it was like, or what was possibly like it, Henri could not formulate, no matter how long she took it in. There was nothing like it.

When she looked at the evening light, the way it spilled over the Union County Fair and turned the rides into wiry silhouettes, when she felt the way that it sickened her to position her eyes toward the sunlight and against their own reflexes, Henri could think about nothing but the imperceptible sunset itself. The sunset cooperated with no comparisons, it could be framed by no sense of referential understanding, but it was also recurrent across every single day, solely unique and yet infinitely replicable. In its irrationality, the sunset stared Henri down from above, and dared her not to blink first.

Henri looked down. The wide face of her wristwatch seemed illegible for a moment, as Henri's eyes apertured. The two needly hands on the watch-face formed a sideways tick-mark between the numbers, and for an instant, those numbers meant nothing at all, until Henri assigned them meaning.

The time was five past six, but Henri seemed to know this before she even read the hour and minute hand. Henri brushed a curl of her spindly golden hair from her forehead, only to get the watch out of her sight and give her arm some simple task. Just like looking at the sun, her watch-face bothered her in a way that felt deep and dysfunctional, as though the thoughts were clotting her head like inactive blood in a kinked vein. To Henri, it did not feel right to simply know, without thought and without comprehension. Everything known needed a reason to be known, and everything cost a mixed expenditure of memory and logic. That was the governing rule that held the experience of life together, for as long as Henri could remember. Nothing was inherent. To know something on its own, like the sunset or the watch-face, was insensibly wrong.

She closed her eyes from the fairground, and in noisy darkness, she held the hand of her partner beside her, and counted to herself. Each number, without symbol or quantity, but just a natural and right succession from one to another, always ascending. A right direction, a correct way, regularity and pattern in enduring linkage.

“Henri.”

She had reached the count of twelve, and felt Anna’s warm fingers pull gently at her own fist and forearm, as Anna’s voice whirled among her thoughts like a wind stirring leaves. Before she even opened her eyes, Henri felt both of her partner’s hands upon her arm, embracing it. She counted three more, to bring her enumeration to a cleanly divisible fifteen. Then she opened her eyes and saw Anna.

“What’s bothering you?” Anna asked. Her voice was soft and ephemeral, like old radio static, and hearing her own name in Anna’s voice made Henri feel as though she was turning the knob on that radio, switching Anna’s waves by her own will.

“Nothing’s bothering me,” Henri said. “Maybe just the heat.”

It was seventy-nine degrees, as per Henri’s cellphone, which Henri had last checked in the passenger seat of her own car during the drive over.

“We can go home if you want,” Anna offered, her voice almost like a question, withdrawn and coiled and hopelessly inviting. “We need to get up early tomorrow anyway.”

“No,” Henri replied. “I’m alright.”

Henri felt Anna lean in close on her shoulder. The taller of the two, Anna leaned over onto Henri, dipping her spine and doubtlessly unbalancing herself just to be close. Henri, surmising what Anna might have wanted, rested herself upon Anna’s lowered head, which stroked Henri’s cheek with Anna’s dense hood of iron-black hair. It was soft and cushion-like, despite the weight of the tall Anna’s head, and the smooth arc of her skull.

Henri felt like an animal, acting according to basic signs and communicative movements. One action meant another action, but neither meant anything else. Their purpose was no more than to beget more of themselves. But Henri felt a slight stiffness on Anna’s cheek, an implicit smile. Knowing that the

smile was there pleased Henri, and she reached across herself to hold onto her partner beside her, until the four arms of the couple were all circuited together. With her left arm reaching across her abdomen, Henri felt the noiseless twitching of her wristwatch against her stomach, keeping time for her endless counting. On her shoulder, Henri felt the rising and descending breaths of Anna, countering arrhythmically, each breath always out-of-step from the last. The ticking of Henri's wristwatch tangled with Anna's breathing, sometimes in sync and other times in diametric alternation, and both continuums pulsed tectonically through Henri's body. But Henri could not stop counting either one. She hoped that her own body was packed thickly enough with blood and organs that her thoughts could remain fortified and buried.

Twenty-four gondolas coroneted the Ferris wheel. Henri and Anna sat on opposite sides of a picnic table, inhaling the listless, smoky air back and forth. The Ferris wheel spun, its center surrounding Anna's head. No matter where Henri looked, the Ferris wheel would still stand there, on the edge of the fairground. Even if she left, even if she never would leave or never have arrived, the Ferris wheel on the far side of the grounds would still hold twenty-four gondolas. Henri had counted; it was so.

In the corner of her eyeline, Henri could see Anna looking down onto the table, slowly and carefully rotating a plastic water bottle in her hands. It warped the sight of Anna's navy-blue shirt, and the label on the bottle was loose and tattered with condensation. Anna held the empty bottle with such a delicate yet irrevocable grip, as though the creased and dimpled plastic was thin crystal glass, with only one moment of unshielded exposure to gravity needed in order to annihilate itself. The thought of it made Henri want to wince.

Twenty-four gondolas.

The bottle of water cost five dollars from a food stand, which Henri had paid for. Anna did not even need to whisper to her to request, but Henri knew that she would be paying. Henri felt a cinch in her gut, and with every muscle and exertion, she kept that phantom ache from reaching her face and slackening her expression. What she knew about Anna, she did not want Anna knowing about her.

Wordlessly, the two sat like thus, just far enough apart to be unable to comfortably touch by fingertips across the splintery paint on the planks of the table.

There had never been much that Henri had felt herself distinctly wanting. She felt patterns of aversions and gradients of dislike. But she knew that she wanted Anna.

The evening darkness had grown more acute. The lights of the fair seemed to go brighter, and the small spouts of dust kicked up from the tarmac were no longer visible against the shade that slithered across the ground. The crowds were more diffuse compared to earlier. Although the fair was still chattering with conversation, it was clear through the widening silent spaces between all the couples, families, and parties, that the occupants of the fair were beginning to scatter back home. The rides all hissed and chugged and quivered, timid of their own size and afraid of their own functionality. The depleting sunlight made the bars and frames of the rides seem to fuse into each other in the coming darkness, becoming beam-wrought monoliths of themselves, like they were sculpted from a single black line, crossing and coursing, opening and closing itself. The metal whined, the music hummed. The fewer people were there, the more that the fairground itself became more visible, the more of it asked to be noticed, to be counted and quantified.

Anna placed her hand higher on Henri's forearm, near her elbow, stretching down and across the table. Henri felt a minor convulsion, a false stimulus somewhere under where Anna touched her. Anna lifted the empty water bottle slightly.

"I'm going to throw this out," she said.

"Okay," Henri answered, toward the sound of Anna's papery voice.

"I'll try not to get lost this time," Anna said. Her words, interlocked like hooks, connoted a smile, jest. Henri knew what Anna was referring to, but the humor felt disconnected, a lost thought wandering out from Anna's mouth and infiltrating Henri's mind, to get lost again, shuffled between layers of understanding. Nonetheless, Henri smiled, because she assumed that was what Anna wanted from her.

"Alright," Henri said.

Rested with her arm on the table, Henri counted to herself twelve cages on a ride on the other side of the fair. The was almost like the Ferris wheel, but shorter and narrowed. Each cage, fitting two people seated on a bench, encircled the long ovular body of the ride, and slid along its perimeter, which was dotted with wide glass lightbulbs. One cage fit at the crest and the bottom of the oval, always alternating, spending time alone only in the moment it took for ascent to become descent. Then each cage turned and spiraled around its fixture, rattling its doubled occupants, although their joyful howls all seemed to melt in the other screams and shrieks from around the fairground. The ride's impressive height made stout the roofs of the game-pavilions around it, the variously skewed fair-games that knew no such thing as a winner. But the ride, the chain of jingling metal cages, seemed different to Henri. Its appearance stalked her every sensation. The noises that it emitted enticed her to gaze closer, its shadows and shakes scraped at her brain by way of her ear. Nobody else seemed to notice this ride. Even the giggling couples queued in line beside it seemed unaware of what they awaited. They laughed and playfully shoved and staggered into each other's loose embraces, but of the ride, they seemed almost ignorant. It was impossible to view their expressions from across the fairground, but Henri did not want to look too closely at them anyway.

The ride preyed on Henri's sight and plumbed deep into her ears. The squealing of the metal, every piston and beam choking on its own oil, formed a language whose beauty was its regularity. The iron groaned as it lifted the cages up, and a choir of filigree attempted toneless responses as it shook under or above the weight of two riders. It was just so, as every cage was tossed tumbling skyward, and so as it guided each cage back down, in a flow that must have felt like chaos from the inside, but was simple pendulum motion from the outside. Each sound of the machine's voice had a source, and a sense of time. By some order and pattern that Henri tried to figure, the ride was a duodecimal clock.

Although she knew it was false, Henri thought about being the only one at the Union County Fair to have seen this hidden ride. Perhaps it was a secret laid for her, a complex and resolute interplay of sights and sunsets and momentary loneliness. Were Anna still beside her, Henri thought that she might still be looking over at her, and she might not have seen the ride at all. But that she would instead be

looking across at the warm and enticing skin on Anna's neck, and into the smooth, whiskey-colored wellsprings of her eyes. But Anna was not there at the moment.

A cage twisted off the ride during its rapid descent. The cage hammered the concrete ground after one second of aerial freefall. Henri, by habit, counted how many seconds the cage was in the air before it collided with the ground. Somewhere, there was a scream.

The ride screeched to a stop, with the eleven cages dangling in their places. Then the sound settled, distant despite its colossal volume, as though it was an echo of something else from even further away. The sound was of the metal itself coming to understand its own weight, its density, the sturdiness of its locks. The impact raised a column of dust that lingered in the air and hovered around the floodlights and the neon. Fragments of concrete and flecks of sundered metal bounced onto the roofs of the games, and the people in line for the ride all lifted their elbows to their faces, shielding from the afflictive rain. Behind them all, the remains of the cage were out of view behind the gathering crowd. From the residual echo of the crash grew the commotion of voices, each rising over the other, then over itself.

On the opposite side of the fairground, Henri stood up from the picnic table. Her fingernails stabbed into the flesh of her palms at her sides. Her face felt exposed, as if her entire body had been dug out from behind it. The place felt wrong, and she felt wrong for being there. At once, she knew too much and too little. Thoughts and malformed ideas clustered and mucked in her head, as directionless and jittery as the crowd around the ride. She watched as they all started reaching and screaming toward the operator of the ride, a tall and portly man with greasy hair, looking around and keeping one arm held fast against the control panel on his platform. Even the other attendees around Henri, too frightened or startled by the crash to move toward it, were standing transfixed, watching it lay there under the light.

The sound of the music still simmered out of the speakers, undisturbed. Already, blue and red lights had started to blink between each other from out in the parking lot, and the swooping cry of a siren was rending the silence apart. The tones of the siren repeated, over and over again. Instinctively, Henri knew that the keening loop of the siren lasted six seconds. That was all that she could know for certain. Six seconds.

Before Henri could realize her own placement, she was half-running alone, back toward the entrance of the county fair. She did not know why she was running away, only that she was, and only that to leave the fair and be alone with her terror was all that she desired.

Henri heard her name. She heard it burn the edges of the voice that called it out, loud and unimpeded despite the murmuring crowds. Henri stopped in her stride and gathered her legs below her. The voice was Anna's.

Henri turned around, her thoughts like weightless dust in her head, never to come down. The seconds moved over her. Henri was powerless to halt them. With her step interrupted, every second that she stood nearer to the exit than Anna, became harder for Henri to deny, even to herself. The tarmac still held against the soles of her shoes, the light still pierced her eyes from the same angle, and Anna's voice still burrowed Henri's brain.

Anna's tall frame looked slouched and uneasy. Her once-comfortable hands searched for the pockets on her shorts, as her legs took probing steps toward Henri. With each step that closed the distance, her face paled and slipped across the front of her skull, as though already half-asleep and still walking. Henri moved back toward her and encircled an arm around Anna's shoulder, walking beside her and partially behind, and ferried her toward the gate.

"What happened?" Anna asked.

"I don't know. Let's just go home."

Silence settled over the two of them, as the sounds reveled in the nightfall behind them both. One arm around Anna by her side, Henri walked forward along the same path of the fairground that she had just nearly ran. The same surroundings moved out to her periphery, remembering her even as she tried to forget them. Henri matched Anna's narrow stride and hunched form, following her footsteps like a delayed and patient shadow.

She was unsure what exactly to say. Soundless words flowed tidally in and out of her attention. She said what she herself wanted to hear in that moment, and pretended as though her own voice belonged to the both of them.

“It’s all okay,” Henri said. “We’re going to be fine.”

“How does something like this happen?” Anna asked.

Henri hushed her, and gently guided Anna’s head frontward, away from the nettle and the noise.

“Let’s just go,” Henri said to her. “I’ll drive us home.”

Anna shook her head, turning her neck beneath the bend of Henri’s elbow. She looked away from Henri, toward the floodlights in the parking lot. The glow of the lights was accompanied by a swirling host of moths, reduced to bright blips in the night sky from the distance.

“Your license is still suspended,” Anna said waveringly. “We shouldn’t risk it. I’ll drive.”

Henri sharpened the angle of her arm around the nape of Anna’s neck, and she pressed her fingertips around the slope of Anna’s shoulder. Henri inhaled and held her breath, fuming herself on Anna’s smell. Something like anger thorned into Henri’s insides. She maintained the angle by which she held Anna, until she felt her shift within her grasp. Almost apologetically, Henri caressed Anna’s forearm with her cheek, and exhaled. Both of them moved in dragged, misaligned half-steps, toward the parking lot. With each step, Henri counted each misalignment between the two of them, sliding her attention between Anna’s footfalls. She affixed her attention to Anna, and away from the thought that Henri had been ready to abandon her. The thought grafted itself around Henri’s mind, like a regenerative weed, left overgrown.

In the exit from the parking lot, the fog of exhaust from a line of unmoving cars left a parselene around the flickering police lights. Henri sat in the passenger seat with her forehead flat against the cold window. Her very thoughts and ideations retreated from the chill of the glass, climbing and sinking into each other to reach the back of her head. Anna had both hands tight around the steering wheel, her eyes unblinking at the chain of red rear-lights before her, and the cloud of brights behind. The flashes of a single ambulance and three police cars stayed near the sides of the fairground. A police officer waved the cars in the direction of the solitary clogged exit lane. From the passenger side, Henri could not read his

expression, but it looked like apathy, as though the man was watching a film on a bright screen and not directly interfacing with the real.

That expression reminded Henri of how Anna looked when she was watching a movie. Every film that the couple watched was always Anna's suggestion, and Henri would spend the runtime watching the screen's most salient colors reflect off Anna's stoic face. She would appear so invested in the screen that her face looked almost spiteful, perhaps of the fact that what she was watching was the films' luminate refusal to exist in real life. But Anna would enjoy them, as far as Henri could detect. The films that Anna had the most to say about were the ones for whom her expression changed the least while watching.

That was how Anna appeared now as well. She was mesmerized, enthralled by nothing at all. Henri tried to figure out what thoughts perambulated around Anna, what words she would say if she wanted to say anything. Nothing came to Henri. Only a self-reflexive anger, knotting in her mind between herself and the vision of Anna in her head. Henri referred to that vision with Anna's name, but it was not Anna. It was a painted shadow behind Henri's eyes, made to look like Anna; a mimic, imperfect in its very perfection. That was the Anna that wandered Henri's mind, astride from memory to memory. It was not the Anna that was seated in the driver's seat of Henri's car. Each version of Anna begging to be the other. Each tugged at Henri's perception until she could no longer look at the woman in the driver's seat, for anger had pooled in the sockets of Henri's eyes, drowning her every sight.

Anticipating no answer, Henri wondered to herself what Anna would have been looking at. The cars in front of theirs formed a line so extensive that their farthest lights were indistinguishable from the Newlocke skyline. The protracting arc of the cars made numbering them impossible, for Henri had instinctively tried. They vanished into the city, ever unknowable.

Henri could remain in Newlocke, New Jersey, for the remainder of her life, just like she had wanted, and she would never see any of the people from the fair again. Or even if she did, she would never possibly know. If she learned their names, each letter would eventually dissolve into their base sounds, like the acid on her tongue from when Henri was a teenager. Their faces would shift and swallow

their own details. If they knew her, they would forget her too. Henri turned her head axially against the window, looking out at the trees that lined the road. The low branches were in the height of their bloom, although there were only bloated silhouettes to determine this. The branches latticed and slithered into each other, like a vast scattered cage imprisoning the outskirts of Newlocke.

The crashed cage on the fairground ride would have seated two people, or maybe only one. The possibility of there only having been one rider seemed the better alternative. The rider would have fallen through the air undistracted, without the fear of another to be their final sight. They would never have needed to see the despair of someone they loved, or even someone they knew, if only for the single second that it took for the cage to fall to the ground. Henri moved in her seat, and reached her left hand over to the top of Anna's thigh, close to her knee. Her flesh was soft and accommodating around Henri's thin fingers. Henri rubbed Anna's thigh back and forth by microinches, apologizing to herself without saying a word. She hoped that Anna's presence was her forgiveness.

Henri moved her hand toward Anna's knee, once and then twice. At the start of the third descent, Anna's hand lowered from the steering wheel, resting crosswise atop Henri's, with Anna's fingers near Henri's wrist, and her thumb atop her knuckles, tracing their crest over her skin, as had Henri over her kneecap. Once, twice, then three times, before Henri retracted her arm, self-turned anger trickling through her muscles.

The car lurched forward a few feet, and leaned back into another halt. Anna spoke. Her voice was dry and encrusted to her throat.

"Are you okay?" she asked plainly.

"Yeah," Henri answered.

"I just want to be home already," Anna said. "I just fucking want to be at home."

Henri thought it was strange, the way in which Anna enunciated "home." She was affixing the word to a breath each time, savoring it. Henri could not tell why.

"I know," Henry said. "I know."

The car swung forward again. Anna pressed the gas for a single moment, and the car moved only the distance that it took to come to a complete stop again when she footed the brake. The car behind did the same, the shadows from its headlights swelling over Henri and Anna. Henri looked upward at the top curve of the window, at the shred of the city sky. A raindrop spattered onto the glass, leaving a circlet of water that cohered to itself and trailed down the window. Another raindrop followed, plotted erratically in another portion of the window, directly onto where Henri's cheekbone leaned. More rain fell, tearing apart the lights and clicking against the car, rattling it like a cage of frightened animals. Henri slid her phone from her pocket, turned on the screen, and navigated to the weather. No rain was forecasted, neither now nor before. It never rained in Newlocke. Yet there it was.

Without a movement, Henri's anger at herself explored every portion of her body like a rush of anxious vitality. Effortlessly, the anger filled parts of her consciousness that had been laid fallow since her childhood. Her anger was fitted perfectly to her, as she was fitted exactly with Anna. The pangs of rage that Henri felt for herself, the recursive cyclical memory of half-running from the fair alone, felt to her nerves like the warm strands of Anna's hair, nuzzled against her face.

Henri pulled the apartment keys from her pocket, but Anna had already unlocked the door with her own keyring and held it open. The two crossed the doorway of their apartment building and clasped each other's hands. Henri could feel rainwater, wrung from the shoulder of Anna's shirt, drip down into the meeting-point of their forearms, above the wrists. Henri's long hair, curled by the rain, dangled in front of her eyes like golden spirals, reaching for completion that their very forms and weights would not allow.

Joined at the palms, Henri and Anna ascended two flights of twenty-four stairs, and opened two more doors before they were back in their apartment. The space was utterly quiet, and hostile with heat. Dense mugginess, almost visible by the way it stung Henri's eyes, filled the apartment and gnashed at the two entrants, gorging itself on their stowaway rainwater. Henri heard Anna sigh contently. Henri thought

that she was tasting the last cold breath before the apartment's faulty radiator would lay claim to her respiratory tract. Henri tolerated the heat, but it was the feeling of density that pestered her. It was a sense of being followed, a presence always molding, collapsing, and remolding around her. It felt like wading through clear clay, leaving casts of herself all around the apartment.

The pair passed the kitchen. Henri had brought all the kitchenware with her in a cardboard box when she moved to Newlocke from Bulwark, Florida. The box itself still sat in the corner of the narrow kitchen, now a small makeshift dry-storage crate for onions and potatoes. As did the small television screen once belong to Henri, on which Anna displayed each film, every weekend. The couch in front of the television was plump and dotted with nits of loose thread. Bunched onto Henri's end of the couch was a red fleece blanket, while Anna's end held a crescent-shaped pillow, to keep her back upright and attentive to the television screen. Laying exposed beside the couch was the broken radiator, propagating unending heat through the apartment regardless of the season or temperature-setting. The twelve black iron-wrought frames of the radiator stood next to each other in unimpeachable parallel, as though sturdily spiking the apartment to the spine of the building, keeping the entire place steady and warm, whether inhabited or not.

Henri followed Anna past the living room toward the apartment's bedroom. Walking behind one another, Henri let go of Anna's hand and let it fall to her side, so as not to need to extend her arm backward on her account. Henri thought it unnecessary. She looked over the shelves of her books, toward the radiator.

"We need to tell him that it's still always on," Henri observed. Anna nodded, and reached her arm behind her, extending her fingers downward and inviting Henri to hold onto her for the last remaining footsteps into their bedroom.

The bedroom was warm, dark, and numb, as though the space itself was sleeping. Even entering it made Henri feel yoked with fatigue. Anna guided her toward the bed from further in, nearly blocking the window. Henri could see, in the straggling light, Anna kicking off her shoes with her heels. Henri reached toward the light-switch beside the post of the door.

“No,” Anna said. Even in low and indeterminate visibility, Henri knew that Anna was addressing her directly. She obliged, and lowered her arm back toward her side. Like a shape in the darkness in the corner of her eye, Henri felt anger draw borders across her mind. Anger, not at Anna, but at herself, in a manner that felt correct and deserving.

The only light came from the argent glow of the streetlights outside. By the time it reached the window, the light was already dispersed and weak, and could barely drag its reach past the far side of the bedroom, opposite the bed. Henri ground her teeth together, and pressed her feet onto the floor. Darkness meant more uncertainty, more knowing without observing. Henri listened for any noise in the darkness. But she knew that driving made Anna exhausted, and that there would not be much to hear.

Over on the bed, she heard Anna undo her belt, and the gentle tapping of metal buckle escaping its own tension. She heard the shifting of the sheets, and Anna drawing a long breath, tilling her lungs. Henri followed her sound and lay next to her on the bed. The sounds were not Anna. They were emissaries of Anna. They were Anna as Henri reconstructed her, without seeing her. But they were not Anna.

As Henri spread herself across the sheets and the wooden bedframe groaned around her, she understood that these sounds were not herself either. The noises were only noises. Henri thought herself maladaptive to Anna’s mind, just as she felt Anna was to hers.

She grasped Anna closer. Their bodies fit perfectly together. Each limb and bone could find its comfortable opposite, even in the dark. Henri held fast around Anna’s ribcage, as the anger wrapped around them both.

Henri questioned why she had run away at the fairground. She answered herself, without speaking, that she had run because she felt as though she had to. She ran because it was the evolutionary purpose of running to create distance from the adverse, the inimical, and the hated. She asked herself again why she had run. There was an absolute and numerical truth to the fact that she had tried to. Her two knees still stung, and her ten toes curled at the end of the bed, near Anna’s ankles. Between both the silence, and the tightness with which she held onto Anna, Henri felt torn to pieces by their causal lines.

But she knew she was evading her own question. She asked herself why she tried to run. She answered that it was because Anna was still there.

“Henri,” Anna said, tired and lamentingly, “We still need to go to my mom’s house tomorrow.”

Henri stroked the center of Anna’s abdomen. Anna’s voice seemed arid, almost disgusted with itself with the way it crawled from her mouth. Henri felt the same way, although she muted the thought.

“I know,” Henri said automatically, and continued stroking Anna, savoring each touch on her fingertips, sampling it as though checking for a response, of which there was none. The absence of response added only hollowness, letting the room accumulate more absences and voids.

“Just try not to think about it,” Henri said, to no reply still. She thought that maybe Anna had already drifted into sleep.

Henri felt as though she did not deserve any response. Anger swarmed around her, spreading around her in the ink-black bedroom. Henri wanted forgiveness for her every thought. She demanded forgiveness, starved for it. Henri hooked her leg around Anna’s shin, and she dug with her lips into the stalky muscles of Anna’s neck and down the skin that cascaded from her clavicle. She squeezed and constricted herself around Anna, thrashing herself with Anna’s body.

Henri did not just desire forgiveness. She wanted to extract forgiveness herself, as though sucking venom from a bleeding wound with her mouth. She would show Anna her own presence and make it unquestionable, vanquish any thought of her ever running away, and Anna would understand, even if she wouldn’t at first. Henri did not stop. She drew her fingers into the hem of Anna’s shorts and mantled over on top of her.

“Henri,” Anna said, her voice rising amidst her sleepy state. “No—”

Henri pressed her lips onto those of Anna, almost baring her teeth over Anna’s tongue, swallowing her words. Anna’s flesh felt inert below Henri’s grip, like meat capable of speech. Bound by fatigue, Anna would not have the strength to struggle. Henri latched to her with her fingers, taking the forgiveness that she longed for.

“No,” Anna said again, slurring her syllable as though vomiting. Her voice echoed in Henri’s ear, as though sounding like the first time that Henri had truly heard it. Anna’s eyes were still mostly closed, dubiously unaware, or at least motionless. Henri lowered off of Anna’s reclining body. It had done nothing to quell Henri’s anger at herself. It had done nothing to answer her question. But the way that Anna’s voice sounded enticed Henri. Even if arisen from panic, Anna’s voice was a response, and a response was what Henri wanted.

Nonetheless, Henri rested down behind Anna again. Perhaps she was asleep, perhaps so close enough to sleep that any perception would dissolve and fade around her. Henri could not tell, and there was no use to figure out. She had tried before to have figured Anna out, to interface with her. She had tried to understand Anna, by breaking open her mind. Anna was always resistant, and Henri was always patient. Now, Henri thought, this time must have been no different.

Henri spread a blanket over herself and Anna, who was still unmoving except for regular breaths, cresting and falling, over and over; a ceaseless life-engine.

Henri held Anna close, listening to her heartbeat through the ridges of her spine. Anna was hers. Anna’s body was a clustered set of twos and fives. Two hands, two legs, two eyes and a bipartite mouth. Five toes, five fingers, four limbs and a head made five extremities. Twos for sensation, fives for activity. Thirty-two teeth in two split jaws, two-hundred and six symmetrical bones arranged like a warped pentangle. That was Anna, all that laid true in Henri’s arms, facing away from her. Nothing more was Anna, just as nothing more was Henri, than her own curation of twos and fives.

Henri winced, and cushioned her face against Anna’s back, tormented by the heat and the anger which could not escape her, could not be redirected.

“Why do I make you happy?” Henri asked, her voice muffled. “I want to know why you love me.”

There was no answer.

Either Anna was asleep, or perhaps Henri was as well and could not know. Already the events of the evening were starting to pestle themselves into a fine and scattered dust in her head. There was much to do tomorrow. Always was there more to do.

The rain trickled against the window, and out of the silence arose a bellow of thunder, as though the vast, all-touching quiet had grown compressed, solidified, and vengeful.

His Sister's Apartment

(Autumn I)

When Ambrose moved in with his sister, he had not worked in close to four continuous weeks, because the actions of lifting his camera, aligning the viewfinder to his left eye, and allowing light to openly pass through, had all started to hurt him in a part of himself that he couldn't recognize. The pain, the infectious guilt, spread from his camera, to its carrying case, and soon throughout his own new apartment, filling the air like the penetrative summer light, ripping Ambrose apart in increments of seconds spread over a month. That was what Amicia, his sister, had said when she called him all those weeks ago.

"It must feel like being ripped apart," she offered.

"Yeah," Ambrose replied.

It was not like being torn apart. It was a horror of wholeness. Ambrose had every part of himself, every stray memory, every shred of thought that writhed in his head like an animal caught in a net, all to himself and no one else. Despite his own desires, Ambrose was still there. When Amicia's voice emanated from his cell phone, Ambrose tried to parse what she must have been feeling, how it must have been to see himself, to hear himself, to know of his consciousness from outside of it. But when he thought about this, his mind conjured nothing. A dizzying feeling of nothing, like looking into the late sunset until the burning was too much to bear.

Amicia offered to let him live in her apartment in East Newlocke, and Ambrose refused at first. He refused because he knew how much he wanted to live with her. He had been pleading with her for weeks, running every possible practicality through the two of them, but when Amicia extended the offer, Ambrose had no idea how to respond, so he refused out of instinctive terror.

After Ambrose had hung up, he lay down sideways across the bed, affected by nothing but gravity. His eyes traced over every surface in the bedroom, as the last gilding of afternoon sunlight pulled over every contour, illuminating all the dust, hairs, and food-crumbs that covered the room. Larger

fragments of the place were flayed clothes and disparate shoes, hospital drawstring bags, camera parts and loose papers. Cardboard boxes, partially packed or unpacked, spread across the room and all its mess in a gluttonous, overfilled graze. About half of the items in the room were now artifacts of no owner. Ambrose, looking down at them from his bed, was just their caretaker, the last arbiter of their fate. No matter how long they would be in his position, they would not be his. They would sooner be lost to all of humanity than belong to Ambrose.

A few days later, Ambrose relented, and asked Amicia again. The possibility of living with her overshadowed Ambrose like smoke around his fevered face, searching for an opening inside of him. Trying to imagine what living there with Amicia exhausted Ambrose. To envision it required the effort of a physical act, that lightened his head and scorched his nerves.

At the end of the summer, most of the loose artifacts and boxes were still splayed across the floor and leaving the negative space like a net that had trawled them all up from deep sunken depths. With plenty still left unattended, Ambrose pulled the apartment door closed behind him with cold, stiff fingers, and with a twist of his arm the wrong way around, he made sure that the door was locked. Then he left Maro Park for East Newlocke.

With the boxes that Ambrose could convince himself to carry, he had fully relocated into Amicia's apartment by the time autumn had come. The long light-paths stretched time from the shut windows in Amicia's home. The place twirled with dust, pulverized bits of life. Inside the apartment stood bookshelves, like bones keeping the place from collapsing under its own weight. Ambrose was afraid to walk too quickly or to step too loudly, lest his very presence break something. Even as Amicia unbuckled her tall, heavy boots at the door, Ambrose curled his toes in the edges of his tennis shoes and clasped his fists within the pockets of his coat, grasping at himself with every limb. He felt like he was about to break apart into fine dissolution, like a handful of sand plunged into water, just like how he and Amicia would do when they were children, in the winters when their father took them to the beach.

Amicia's apartment seemed to abide by different laws of physics than Ambrose was accustomed to. Ambrose felt heavier there, his center of gravity spinning fast in every direction like a magnet infused

with electricity. Gazing across the sagging wood floors and the stucco ceiling, the crowded windowsill and the archway casting all space past the kitchen in shadow, Ambrose felt dizzy, yet at the same time, he felt as though he could see with horrifying, indisputable clarity.

“Thank you,” he said to his sister, as the two moved toward the arch. Without his coat and shoes, Ambrose felt penetrable, undefended. The floor felt unforgivably hard under his heels, not like the carpet he was used to, onto which he could lay down for hours and never go sore. Every sensation was a reminder of himself in his new habitat, and a casting out of his mind to view him from outside.

“For what?” Amicia asked. Her voice twisted into itself, like she was searching for something using only her tongue. Ambrose turned to look at her. Her expression was stark and patient, eyes open just past the tangents of her irises, mouth flat and steady, her face unrestful.

“What do you mean?” Ambrose asked.

“What are you thanking me for?” Amicia questioned back, almost mimicking her brother’s weighty cadence, demonstrating how to lift his own direful tone, making it seem stronger in Ambrose’s ear and lighter in his head. Around the siblings, silence prowled from every surface. The emptiness of Ambrose’s new surroundings tunneled into his throat, compressing his breaths. He thought he could feel the dust in his lungs, the crumbly smell of wood on the back of his tongue. The air hollowed him out, seeking out an answer.

“For taking me in,” Ambrose replied. “And for all that you did for me when Yaara was in the hospital.”

Each word, each shaped and solidified breath that passed between Ambrose’s teeth, left his body feeling drowned in the air around him, weightless yet still sinking. The fear and the placidity braided inside of him, fortifying the bindings that held his body. Ambrose removed the hands from his pockets and let them drop at his sides. His feet were flat against the floor.

In front of him, Amicia’s eyebrows narrowed and charged, descending, into each other. Her lips pulled inward and her nostrils arched.

“What?” she spat out. The noise of her teeth plucked at the syllable like an arrow letting loose from a bowstring. “Like that I wouldn’t do this otherwise? Why do you say that like I would just leave you?”

Ambrose retreated by a narrow half-step, then stepped back forward by just as much, so as not to make obvious his fear. His body thrummed with heat. He looked down at the skirting-board on the floor, and followed it to the corner of the room, at the place where the monumental bookshelf impressed into the wall. It seemed the sturdiest, most resolute surface in the room. Ambrose could look at it all night and day and it would not be any different. It was proof that Ambrose was still there, that the sharp-angled grandeur of the apartment still surrounded him on all sides, and from below. He swallowed a breath.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” he said. “I just wanted to say thank you.”

Amicia opened her mouth by a sliver, a dark slat through which her tongue subtly measured the pointedness of her incisors. Her face untensed. Ambrose, still focusing down toward the floor, couldn’t see what Amicia’s eyes were doing, how configured her eyelids around the pale whites and greens, how much light they let in, what had been snared in their focus. All of this, he did not know.

“I’m sorry,” Amicia offered. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

She took a step closer to Ambrose, her steps making the floorboards weep in swooping notes, descending as she moved her weight on one foot and ascending behind her. The apartment itself kept an auditory record of where any of its inhabitants were. As long as Ambrose’s legs still held his body perpendicular to the floor, the apartment could hear him, and speak through him.

“I’m sorry,” Amicia repeated. “Just, don’t make it sound like this isn’t something I would do.”

Hearing those words aloud had made Ambrose realize his own uncertainty over whether or not it was.

“Okay.”

The uncertainty pounded again on the inside of Ambrose’s head, with each strike leaving an impression behind to be filled by a new memory of his sister’s voice.

Amicia walked past her brother, gesturing with her hand toward the couch in the corner of the room. Ambrose followed her indication, his neck still stiff and his eyes still unbelieving. The couch was in a shaded part of the room, away from the windows. It was low and looked plush and comfortable to sit on, which made Ambrose realize even more clearly that it would be more often laid on instead for the duration of his stay.

“This is yours for now,” Amicia said.

The arid, dusty-strewn air stuck to Ambrose’s face as though scouring it for his sweat to drink. Quickly, as not to be seen, Ambrose wiped the moisture from his forehead, leaving a streak of cool absence behind it in the trail of his hand. He smiled at his sister, holding contact between their matching green eyes as he wiped the side of his hand against the thigh of his loose-fitting jeans.

Amicia smiled back. Her face had sharp, rocky shadows across the edges of her skull, where the stinging happiness ran deep.

“It’s just nice to see you again,” Ambrose said. “It feels like a long time.”

With the discerning sounds of the floor, words seemed the only presence in the apartment that could not be tracked.

“Newlocke’s a big place,” Amicia responded. Ambrose noticed how she had not quite acknowledged his meager claim about how long it had been since the two shared space. She neither agreed nor disputed it. Ambrose was alone to craft his own answer.

Between dryness and humidity, heat and cold, the air seemed different between every word and breath. With every blink, the apartment appeared newly bright in Ambrose’s eyes, inevitable and unchangeable.

Amicia gazed over at Ambrose. He had felt his smile wavering, the muscles below his cheeks beginning to lean onto his rough, filmy teeth. Within and without, Ambrose felt his entire shape growing weary and revolting. He could tell, in the even intensity of his sister’s pupils, that she knew as well.

“Still,” Amicia continued, “It’s nice to be back with you too, Am.”

The apartment stayed tolerably cool in the daytime, but at nights on the couch, Ambrose felt a chill pushing in on every section of his body. It prickled on his skin, slicing though it without drawing blood. No moment of stillness lasted long enough for exhaustion to set in. Ambrose shivered, each microscopic contraction of smooth muscle pulling his body into itself, until his spine shelled around his folded legs, and his arms reached back on himself to warm his feet. His body conserved its heat like an engine catching its own fumes, slowly depleting. Any heat dissipated into the hands of the night, grown out from the windows.

Huddled under the blanket, Ambrose was constrained in his own limbs. Aside from his own breaths into his chest below his shirt, the only noise Ambrose could pick up in the deepest parts of the night was that of Amicia, snoring and sleep-talking in her room behind the kitchen. Her words were incomplete and cryptic, but her voice, murky with sleep, was unmistakable.

As the cold nights had accumulated and any restfulness vanished from Ambrose's eyes, he warmed himself with anger. Quiet and weighty, the anger sank across his prone, huddled body. Hogtied with his own arms, humiliated, Ambrose felt the anger flood his mind with more sensation in a single night than had every day of misery across the past month. His nerves and spine had felt clear, as though all the unfeeling of the past month had been depressurized along its course to his brain. Ambrose felt a fluid, shapeless anger, that tinged and crackled in his lungs. Impossible color filled his eyes, uncertain whether they were closed or open, like the burning aftershock of a camera flash, saturating seconds with entire days of rage. The anger did not bring him warmth, but it brought the thought of warmth back to his mind. The rage kept Ambrose company from below his skin, and hour by hour down a silent, furious night, the memories he had of Yaara gathered back to him. Ambrose felt liberated of himself, at home away from his body and its ceaseless awareness. The heat that Ambrose felt was not truly there, nor was the stiffness in his fingers, nor the prickling chill in his teeth and nose. They had emerged from the depths of himself, utterly his own, without source or end. Thoughts ran swift spirals around his body, memories old and new colliding. Ambrose screamed a reveling cry into the couch's square pillow, pulling it close

over his head with tight-jointed arms. The soft interior and rough surface of the pillow muted all noise, letting his throat shake within his neck, and clouding his face with the stench of his breath.

Sleep grasped Ambrose imperceptibly, the way that it used to, the way he had missed from back when he would fall asleep with his arms and legs bent around Yaara's thinning form. Alone on the narrow couch, under a square throw-blanket, Ambrose slept in restful resentment. The only sound amidst the cold night air was the sleep-talking of his sister, her words through the walls as imperceptible to Ambrose as his own dreams were to himself.

Morning crawled over the city of Newlocke. From the apartment windows, the air stumbled between the warmth of nascent sunlight and the briskness of a city pulled freshly out of the starry caress of space. To the sound of footsteps disturbing the floorboards, Ambrose opened his eyes slowly, the illusory shapes lining up slowly from his split, cross-eyed sight. His body was sore and sluggish. The farther any extremity reached from his heart, the greater was the surface of the pins-and-needles that crawled on them. Ambrose lifted himself on his elbows. The inside of their joints bent sickly, like rotten wood, sagged from moisture.

Near the window, Amicia was swinging her grey coat over herself, driving her arms into the sleeves and blooming her extended fingertips out of the ends. The hem of her coat reached to her knees, and the lapels folded around her torso tightly and in a comfortable seeming way. Amicia's hair was still somewhat wet, the strands clustered like clashing spears. She knelt down to buckle her boots, as though pulling on the straps more tightly would bring her faster out of the door.

Ambrose inhaled. His breath tasted vile, and his mouth felt fuzzy. He looked over to the window, squinting at the light gathered behind Amicia. He could not remember much about the previous night, but his head stung, as though tapped with electricity.

"Am?" he called out to his sister, "What time is it? Don't you have until eight?"

Amicia threaded the buckle-hole on one of her bootstraps and stood up, one foot covered. She cast a shadow from an askew sunbeam that reached across the living room, almost climbing onto the couch where Ambrose lay.

“No. I’m putting in an extra hour this morning,” she said, “and another hour tonight.”

Her eyes pointed down and her words chopped and flicked as she pressed her other leg into her boot. Her voice seemed to try correcting her tone the same way that her ankle searched for its nook in the leather. She knelt back down and handled the buckle. Ambrose felt his shoulders lighten, as though beckoning him to lay back down and make himself smaller.

“Oh,” he said.

Drowsiness still sloughed in his voice from below his throat. He thought he could remember a low yelling last night, but no sound agitated his memory. He tried looking closer at Amicia, through the sleep that sharpened prisms in his eyes, bending light across every way down the veins in his skull. Her face seemed empty, the muscles relaxed within, perhaps even exhausted like he was. Her mouth was straight, like a support beam between her soft flushed cheeks. They seemed to hang low on her head, falling from her eyes, whose affect eluded Ambrose. He leaned up higher to see into Amicia’s green irises, the ones that genetically matched his own. As though she was instinctively aware, her eyelids lowered and her head turned toward the window, eliminating its own shadow and turning out to face the morning. Ambrose finally laid back down.

“Are you going to be doing anything today?” she asked. Her voice was soft and clear, like glass blown into a cutting sharpness.

“I don’t know yet,” Ambrose responded.

A shameful remorse whirred inside Ambrose’s heartbeat. It went fast, unstoppable, that Ambrose thought he could almost hear his own regret, from among the actual sounds of Amicia’s weighty pounding footsteps, and the wisping of indiscernible speech through the corner of the wall from another apartment. Ambrose hoped to himself that Amicia did not notice the way he watched her, reading her thoughts out of

the facets of her face and the bends of her spine and joints. He looked at her with a revering fraternal admiration, and she looked back at him with two illegible green eyes.

As the two wished each other well, Amicia left through the door and vanished into the dry-smelling air of the apartment complex. Soon she would be gone from the building, to the train-station, and Ambrose would be alone in the apartment. He was a lone visitor, unexplainable and without reason. It tugged at the bottom of his mind, when he realized that nothing that led to him living with Amicia had any tangible reason. It should never have been.

Coiling down his spine and spreading through every nerve, a stinging sensation wrapped around Ambrose, jolting him upright and pushing his legs over the edge of the couch, the cold wood on the soles of his feet like a grounding of the bitter electricity inside of him. The anger returned, the furious pearl at the center of his brain that he needed to extract. Ambrose stood up, the tendons of his knees and back cracking up to his neck, reciprocating the nervous shock up and down his body. He paced toward the window, toward the paling morning light. He turned around, the bookshelves on one side of him, and returned toward the couch, then turned again into the archway toward the kitchen. He remembered Yaara, then in an instant, he forgot. It was slow and fast, like the bending of his tired joints followed by the crack.

Where once he had seen Yaara, he remembered a single moment from when he was a boy of nine years. There was a parking lot, the pointed, rocky asphalt roasting his feet and legs. It was near a beach by some distance, so he rationalized, from the distance of the inland Newlocke apartment, that it was one of the day-trips when his father would take him and Amicia to the beach in wintertime. If Ambrose was nine, Amicia would have been seven. Ambrose was barefoot in the parking lot, straggling sand-grains pressed into his skin, roughening it microcosmically. Ambrose, a short child, and shorter still when barefoot, strayed out into the black lanes of the parking lot. In one single moment, a pickup truck treaded toward him, its grille higher than the boy was tall, and Ambrose, unmoving, felt five fingers grip his hair from the parietal of his skull. Ambrose was pulled back, his feet confoundedly going backwards and forward at once, as Amicia's fingers grasped Ambrose by his hair, and the colossal truck passed by over

where he had been wandering. Ambrose remembered, with closer detail than any sight or smell, the pain at the roots of his hair when Amicia pulled him out of the way of the truck. He remembered the deep pierce that came when his hair filled his young sister's fist. That pain grew across the entire memory, then leapt to others, and others, and others, until Ambrose raged at every year that passed since then, that Amicia had elected to save him from.

He pulled a book from Amicia's shelf with his fingertips, the thumb around the front cover and four fingers in arcs around the back, and travelled to the kitchen. The smell of grease swirled in his nose with every rapid inhalation. He placed the book face-down at the bottom of the sink, then reached, and released water from the faucet. He watched as part of the apartment, part of Amicia, finally acknowledged his anger at her love, that had lingered around even after Yaara had gone.

The sky had gone deep blue outside the window, as though asphyxiating. The apartment was gouged with nightly frigidty, that felt like a sheath of iron, against which Ambrose's head pounded with each motion. At the back of his neck, a pithing pain made his spine recurve.

Ambrose sat on the blankets upon couch, his limbs adhering with sweat to his pants and poor-fitting shirt. He held his knees in his arms, with his bare feet up before him, almost as violet with cold as was the evening sky. His skin was dotted with numb, white blots from lack of movement. Every movement, every stimulus, sped up through his perception, and when it terminated in his brain, the impetus quietly burst in his skull, making Ambrose flinch with a noise that only he could hear. Any sensation was errant. He was not supposed to be here.

The door clicked and rattled open. Amicia entered, lurching behind her every step. In both of her hands were gathered plastic shopping bags, sagging and tugging at her fingers with taut handle cutouts. The bags sank almost to Amicia's feet, and swung with unpredictable arcs, striking her in the shin every couple moments as she took her lopsided steps inside. The leather of her boots caught the brunt of the

strikes, and the sound that the stretched and twisted plastic and the leather enforced by flesh gave off, was something like a scoff.

Amicia wore impatience on her face, its expression so definable that she seemed almost uncaring. Ambrose couldn't tell if his sister truly felt impatient, or if she was only trying to convey it to him. Her hair was tousled and sweaty, its brown catching streaks of the yellow fluorescent light from inside the apartment. Ambrose saw his sister look toward him with her eyes in unbreakable focus. He looked down, and lowered his knees off the couch. He said nothing, and she responded likewise.

The apartment felt smaller still, more so than before. The weight of two pairs of legs had seemed to fold the floor and bring the walls closer together. Ambrose waited, second-by-second, for Amicia to speak, for her warm voice to simmer in the cold air of the apartment, but she said nothing, and neither did Ambrose. Every word that formulated in Ambrose's head regressed into foggy abstraction on the backs of his clenched teeth before it could be voiced.

He saw Amicia follow the length of the bookcase with her eyes, slowly in proportion to the shelf's missing contents. But Amicia said nothing. She did not even look toward Ambrose. Her gaze remained sidwinded, out of the living room and toward the rest of the apartment. Ambrose was in her periphery, and he sensed it. It almost pleased him, for he figured that he deserved it.

In the kitchen, Ambrose ran the water in the grey metal bowl of the sink, swiping the surface of a plate with a coarse sponge. He ran the water continuously over it, displacing the last remnants of the flat, sodden paper into the empty drain, which swallowed it entirely with a shallow ringing noise from the rush of water and pulp pushing the air from its piping. Amicia had not noticed the wet paper in the sink, and Ambrose took the chance to completely erase it from any possible discovery.

Behind Ambrose, and facing the opposite direction, Amicia was restocking the hum of the open freezer with bags of pink, hardened meat.

Ambrose fulcrummed his shoulder up and down, bringing his grip and the sponge over the face of the ceramic plate. Each pass left a trail of thick white soap-bubbles, whose sight like a malforming disease made Ambrose retch. But he swallowed any revulsion, tasting it through the pungent smell that it exuded. In his soaked hands, the airy soap felt like anaesthetization, and its smell burned with a chemical aroma. With his every breath stumbling over itself, Ambrose scrubbed the plate, then held it below the stream of wavering water, pushing down all the suds and herding them into the bottom of the sink. Ambrose was ashamed with how accomplished he felt for cleaning a single plate. If he could, Ambrose would yell until his throat went inside-out and dangled out of his mouth like a prolapsed trunk, but he could not muster a noise.

He laid the plate flat on a towel on the counter, and reached into the other pit of the sink for the second plate, scraping the lingering foodstuff off its surface with his fingernails, which felt soft and moldable in the water.

“So,” Amicia said plainly, with her voice like ice, “I forgot to tell you. Someone at the office is getting married soon. He’ll probably need a photographer.”

Ambrose felt a seizing in his gut, slithering like a malicious vapor under his skin. The guilt plucked at his muscles, biting down on his thoughts and making them howl in pain. This silent, wordless pain spiraled deeper still when Ambrose made himself aware of it. Thinking at all was agony in itself. He clasped the edge of the plate, flattening his fingers even as they curled in grip, enraged not only at the suggestion itself, but that it was his sister who proposed it.

“I don’t want to do that,” he replied, fumbling consonants into each other and spilling sound and spittle off the tip of his tongue.

“Why not?” Amicia asked. Although he was still turned away, he heard her voice more clearly than before, trailing along the walls of the kitchen. Her feet shuffled on the lumpy linoleum floor. He knew she had turned around to face him.

“Am, I’m a fucking failure,” Ambrose hissed.

“What?” Amicia asked back. Her intonation pushed forth into the space of the kitchen, advancing close on her brother even as she stayed on the opposite side.

“I can’t fucking do that,” Ambrose said. He lowered his voice with each syllable, tilling his mouth successively deeper. “He’d probably just fire me anyway.”

“That’s not true and you know it,” Amicia answered. Against Ambrose’s lower voice, hers seemed even louder, weightier. It pulled at the air like a slow shockwave. Ambrose felt an anger stirring and straining in his chest. It clasped around his spine and made him look down. It pooled behind his eyes, burning his brain. But he would not express it. It resisted his words, retreated deeper into himself, trampling every other sensation. Ambrose said nothing, made no attempt at speech. He picked the plate back up, clenching it tight on the soft bridge of flesh between his thumb and index finger, until the skin went red under the water and burned with the soap. Anger still wandered along his body, always ahead of any thought he had of what to say.

Amicia sighed and turned back around. Both siblings continued their tasks. When they ended, Ambrose felt no success. He barely even noticed that he had stopped, even as he laid down on his side on the couch. His anger ran fast, almost undetectably. He was angry at himself as much as he was with his sister, but his rage was spread too thin to encompass both himself and her at the same moment. When the locus of his anger rested on either one of them, Ambrose corrected it toward the other. The process, the furious switching, continued until he fell asleep hours later, and Ambrose had not settled on one person to be mad at.

A week or so had passed. Ambrose had been having trouble remembering days. Autumn was still nestling in between the stout apartments of Newlocke, still carving the wind tunnels and cutting away the limp summer heat like an invisible rot. The spindly trees started to shudder outside the apartment window, knowing the wind would come for them next.

Ambrose had been waking up progressively later each day, each one a longer span of time from when Amicia would leave in the mornings. Her boots wailing against the wooden floor no longer awakened him. Neither did the noises from the other apartments, which were reduced to whimpers in the walls. When Ambrose could hear them, those sounds still crackled, making it clear that at their sources, they are screams. Nor did the maze of half-dreams wake him, in which Ambrose saw a wall and felt a pillow between his head and his curled arm. In those dreams he almost believed that he was back in his bed, that the shadow on the wall was Yaara back beside him, her body filled back out, and able to carry herself under her own weight again. When she spoke, her words were still in the right sequence, she still remembered the faces and voices of others. Then Ambrose would see the apartment in his waking, in all of its sequestered emptiness, chasing his memories back into the pits and fissures in his brain that they had spilled out from.

His rage had rooted into himself, concealed and invisible, even to himself at times. All that Ambrose felt was a soundless, reaving howl. He had spoken little in the past week. He had welcomed Amicia home from work at night, he had thanked her for something imprecise before she retired to sleep, which was often early as well.

That night was an unusually warm evening, the wind was emaciated from a lack of leaves and pedestrians outside. The wind made no noise over the window or between the buildings, only a ridged sigh as it skulked around the corners of the apartment complexes.

Ambrose put his fingers between two books on the shelf, eye-level before him. The books were depleting, barely as much as could be noticed. But their reducing number only had held onto Ambrose's anger, as it now had fewer objects to divide itself between. He felt it whorl down the sink-drain, with all the slimy paper that he filled the sinks with, when Amicia was out.

Ambrose turned his fingers to one side, spreading the spines on the shelf apart, minimizing every dark gap between them for the length of the shelving. With every book whose damp remains he sifted his fingers through at the bottom of the sink, Ambrose had felt his anger subside, then return only a few

moments later, like tempestuous waves eroding sand. Ambrose raked his brain for any sense of desire, any feeling of longing. But he wanted nothing.

He heard the door pull open, and the grasp of dry autumn air swerved into the apartment like a feeding tentacle of the city outside. He heard Amicia's footsteps undulating onto the floor. The door was closed, and Amicia stood beside him, glancing over the bookshelves.

Ambrose and Amicia were beside each other, without a word, the heats of their bodies contained by the silent, ravenous air in the apartment. Ambrose closed his eyes.

"There are books missing," Amicia said. "A lot of them."

Ambrose held his tongue. The cartilage of his nose began to feel hollow, anticipating on reflex a sudden and fast intake and outtake of breath, an overdrive of every vital system. But Ambrose felt none at all. The anger split inside of him, tangling around his organs and beating at his skin and eyes. But it left his mouth untouched.

"Maybe you've left them in your room," Ambrose said calmly.

"No. What have you been doing to them?" Amicia replied, her voice like a stone flung high in the air, halting all the space in the apartment for where it might fall. Ambrose bit into the silence.

"I don't know if this is best for you," Amicia said.

Ambrose turned to her and stepped back. Anger plumed inside of him, like steam condensing and boiling again, distilling itself amidst unending heat.

"Don't say that," Ambrose demanded, his voice cracking as it wrought itself higher. He could not tell if the ringing in his ears came from an echo in his voice, or the rattling of his skull. He saw Amicia's face go sanguine, her eyes honed like emerald arrowheads. She held her arms, pale with exertion, down at her sides in as reflexive of angles as her bones allowed.

"Yaara wouldn't want this for you," Amicia said. Her voice was slower now, and Ambrose felt as though he needed to turn away again, and hear it only in partiality from one single ear.

"You hated Yaara!" Ambrose yelled back to her in accusation, with his face oriented toward the floor.

“What?”

“You hated her!” Ambrose repeated.

“What do you want me to say?” Amicia demanded of him. Her voice was hard and resolute, like a bent bone, and to Ambrose, it sounded as though her entire head was in pain for having to speak. “Do you just want me to admit guilt? Is that it?”

At the mention of it, Ambrose realized just how much he truly wanted that, and twisting through him was a sickly shame for wanting it at all.

“Do you want me to leave?” he shouted at her.

“Ambrose, stop.”

“I’m sick of losing people. First mom, and dad, and Yaara. You’re the only one who’s always there. No matter what you’ve done for me, I’ll just lose you too someday.”

“Ambrose, stop!” Amicia repeated. Her arms shot forth and clasped Ambrose’s shoulders, bracing him still and collapsing his insides. The last of his anger cannibalized itself. He thought he could see, between all the shadows in his sister’s eyes, the same realization that he had as well. He felt whole with her, a single being in two bodies. She was the only one who would not leave him. Ambrose thought that he could see the same notion, forming itself in Amicia’s head from the breaths that repelled into her mouth. But there was no certainty. Ambrose could wager guess after guess, and always was there the possibility that he was wrong, that either he or she had lied. It was always just so.

Ambrose felt nothing at all, once again. As though he was asleep, paralyzed, amid full awareness. He felt his own heart throttle his neck as Amicia gripped his arms. The two each took in loud, belted breaths through nearby open mouths. As the two faced each other, Ambrose felt the cold in the apartment seep into the mouths of him and his sister, like a paired hook binding them together. The only heat was under her hands, on his upper arms. In a flicker of panic rising uninterrupted between the soles of his feet and his eyes, Ambrose leaned forth and pressed his open mouth onto Amicia’s, lips, joining the two at the face. He curled his arms around Amicia’s back and onto her chest, approaching her with his entire body, immersing himself in her heat. He pressed his right leg between his sister’s thighs, intertwining

himself with her. Ambrose grasped her close, and felt Amicia shove herself back, untangling from his grasp, stepping back with an aura of rage that made her entire form tremble. Each breath was almost a furious bellow of melted words, unspoken. Clenching both her fists at her sides, she swayed, dizzy and unbalanced as though infected. Her eyes were solidly upon Ambrose, in hopeless shock at what her brother had done.

“Am, I’m so sorry—” Ambrose began, his voice enfeebled with shame. He was pleading, not with her, but with time itself, to halt for even an uncountably short second, to hold still under the depthless bright sky outside the window. But time moved. Seconds held fast together, without the smallest breakage. Ambrose’s act was covered by each passing moment, into the undeniable past, with every subsequent sensation forming around it, in Ambrose’s mind and Amicia’s.

She looked at Ambrose in interminable horror. Around himself, Ambrose felt the entire apartment and its surroundings fall away, leaving him with only himself, his own body and a mind somewhere lingering therein, like a shadow cowering from light.

“Get out,” Amicia said.

“Please,” Ambrose begged her.

“Out.”

Ambrose stepped, dragging his body, loosely strung together by malignant musculature. He passed his sister, who did not face him. She stood, shivering in her apartment, waiting for nothing at all. To Ambrose, she looked trapped by her own terror and disgust. Ambrose felt his hand around the knob of the front door, its metal still warm from when Amicia had held it. Ambrose left the apartment behind him, and made his way out into the street, lit with streetlights.

Ambrose, with only himself, walked barefoot in some direction across the city of Newlocke. The city was quiet, excepting the omnipresent rumbling of cars, and the distant chattering of fractured conversation, splinters of the unknowable. Hundreds of thousands of windows lined the buildings as they rose into the silvery evening. Behind each one was another apartment, another room, other brothers and

sisters, in some fevered state of semi-existence, undeniably there but which Ambrose would still never know. Unbreaking in his stride, Ambrose walked directly ahead, wherever that was.

Kidney

(Autumn II)

It had seemed to Syd Urman, as he sprinted through the nighttime cold, that he might even outrun the small raindrops that had started to fall from the faint, earth-lit clouds above. Maybe he could run so swiftly, pull his stride to such lengths, that he could reach the edge of the unseen raincloud that hung over Newlocke tonight. The swinging of his arms, like two pendulums on a perpetual-motion-machine, started to wring out water from the shoulders of Syd's polyester shirt. By microseconds, irritatingly noticeable, he could tell that the asphalt of the street was becoming slippery with rain, and the mothy glow of the streetlights was starting to reflect from below. As usual, it was late enough that there were no cars out, and the skeletal street belonged to Syd.

It was ridiculous, Syd knew, to even think about outrunning a raincloud, that something so celestially massive could even have any reachable end. But it was an entertaining thought. And to some degree, it had to be true. Syd slowed in his run, collecting both his legs underneath himself, and looked up. The shadow left by any raincloud was indistinguishable from the nonary night sky, and all that could resemble stars were the sharp droplets of rain that flicked his eyes and chilled his aching head.

Syd closed his eyes, and the rain was pressed out of them and streaked down his face. A mist had settled around the streetlights, and now their reflections upon the slickened asphalt had grown brighter. Syd listened for the raindrops slowing down the sheer brick of the nearby buildings, the apartments above the corner-stores and the always-dark restaurants. Water seeping down, splattering against windows with the entire height of the world itself to their momentum, the hording rain sounded like a cheering crowd, applauding something far away.

He slid his phone from the pocket of his sweatpants. The warm fleece made the rain on his palms feel like guilty sweat. With rain speckling the bright screen, Syd saw just how little time he had managed on his run tonight, before the rain had started, and the chill of the water had marked his skin with goosebumps like a ghostly sickness. The two competing desires each plucked at Syd's insides. He wanted to go home, to have a reason to stay inside in the warmth, to get into bed with Janis, to be in his own

darkness back in the apartment. But he wanted to conquer the rain, to simultaneously appease himself and disprove himself. To go inside, stopping his run, and letting the rain stand in the way of what he truly wanted, it felt like an act of self-contempt. It made Syd feel like less of a man.

He sidestepped into an awning, in front of a store sealed slats of grime-smelling metal. With his thumb, Syd wiped the screen of his phone, examining the time and waiting for it to change. Rivulets of rain flowed over the wrinkled metal awning, and the reflective streams of water reached down into quivering puddles on the sidewalk like the slender bars of a cage. The light from his phone screen was prismatic with water, and the wallpaper image, a photograph of him and Janis embracing on a train-seat, was blotched and magnified by the rain and the sweat on Syd's thigh.

Syd waited, assuming that the rainfall would be brief like it always was. Rain rarely lasted long enough to be witnessed. Usually, the evening would get darker early with ash-grey with clouds, and the next morning there might be some puddles on the more sunken curbs around the city, soon to be eradicated under the sunlight. Occasionally, Syd would be able to hear the growl of thunder, but always without visible lightning. His eyes and Janis's would both dart toward their bedroom window, but there would be no flash, and no light that they had not seen already. The city was an atmospheric anomaly. Newlocke rarely received any heavy rainfall, any lightning strikes, nor had it ever known a blizzard or a hurricane warpath. To see rain outside, to feel its cold soak under uncountable droplets, had felt to Syd like learning a secret.

But this rainfall was not in its usual brevity. It carried on, and clouds kept turning inside-out overhead. The city muttered with the endless strike of rainwater on brick and on metal. No cars passed on the streets. Before Syd could realize it, his phone was already aglow with online search results, the way he had been passing time recently.

-where to donate your kidney

-how much does it cost to donate your kidney

-kidney donation health requirements

Each one, a lattice of blue-green words spread barely legibly over a bright pale background, Syd scrolled through with his thumb, wrinkled and wet. He bit the inside of his cheek, almost hungry but not quite. As he skimmed the search results, Syd rocked back and forth on the rubber soles of his shoes, walking in place, not losing a moment of activity, even as the cold injective raindrops snuck under the awning on the wind. Syd rubbed his side, between his floating-rib and his waist, thrumming the skin with the pommel of his hand.

His phone vibrated in his hand. A message appeared down from the top of the screen, and Syd felt the vibration rattle his body with a quick twinge of guilt, felt and gone. It was a message from Janis.

-Going to bed. Love you. Get home safe.

It was the same routine the past few nights. Even the guilt was a routine, an unavoidable expectation. If there was something to feel guilty for, Syd thought, it would have been unmanly not to feel guilty.

The later that Syd had gone for his sprints, the earlier Janis had seemed to go to bed. He entertained the idea that maybe their apartment was just that boring and uneventful without him there, but the longer this thought remained in his head, the graver such a notion became, and the colder the rain outside had felt upon his body. If he was what made the apartment worth being in, why was he spending so much time outside? Syd knew the answer, but his attention refused to settle on it for long.

-Good night. I'll be back soon.

It was a lie of intent. It would not be untrue until Syd acted against it, but by then Janis would be asleep. She would not know how long Syd would be out. She would not need to suffer any knowledge of that.

Syd let his cellphone drop back into his pocket. On the street, formless puddles lined the black asphalt like sealing glass. The rain had not let up, nor grown any heavier. It fell with the same speed and quantity as before. It made no rush in its descending drench of the nicer part of Newlocke, near Maro Park where Syd and Janis lived, and where his running-route extended. The desire to continue running had turned into an agitation, a restlessness like the mirrored puddles on the street, that cast the city in an

inverted double. Like the puddles, Syd felt a disturbance in himself, a wrongness for standing still; scattered, and disharmonious.

His breath, chilled down to his lungs by the air and the rain, made frigid his entire body where it had earlier been heated with sweat and activity. Syd rolled his shoulders, touching his flank like a sign of good luck, and ran back into the rain-addled street. He stayed close to the curb, and the puddles lapped at his feet, envious of his mobility. As Syd ran, again, the heat returned to his body, his breath like sparks out of a sun-bright forge. His feet met the ground, striking upward on his thighs, which he could almost feel growing more toned and defined. In his gut, he felt his dinner undoing itself, upcycling into energy, quickening the blood that washed through his kidneys.

Syd sped up, driving down his leg onto the concrete as rainwater spattered on his socks and weighed his bright hair against his scalp. His breath had burned so hot that the emptiness left by each exhale felt freezing by comparison. He conquered the rain, the cold. Against all the emptiness of the city at night, closest to the starless space above, Syd had made some minor difference. His body, his life, had accomplished something, even if it was the warming of his chest against the bladed rainfall.

Syd turned one corner, then another, on the empty night street, under the null gaze of thousands of darkened windows, thousands of sleeping people, multiplied over the whole breadth of Newlocke. Around the nicer part of the city, he ran, into the chill of the rain evaporating from his skin.

Syd felt a presence upon him the next morning. A presence within his chest and mouth, as though he was underwater. He was awake for a single moment in sheer darkness before he even opened his eyes. Nothing seemed correct. Perhaps he had slept the whole night holding Janis, and was breathing in her smell and her hair. Such a presence had made his arms feel inactive, his feet as though they had never even left the floor and still held him exhaustively upright.

Syd opened his eyes. The late-fall sunlight ravaged through the window, grasping at the wealth of shadows in the room left around the floor by the slotted shades. Janis had already gotten out of bed; Syd

was alone. His side of the blanket was bundled at his feet, in a curve between his side and Janis's. What he thought might have been a ringing in his ears was the running of the shower and of music on a phone-speaker played on the other side of the wall, explaining Janis's whereabouts. Still, a strange heat nestled inside Syd's body. The heat was straining, a physical summoning that he had no choice but to answer. He tried not to feel it. He would feel what he wanted to feel, and for however long he could this morning, he wanted to rest, to feel nothing. Nights were for his running, days were simply days. That was the way it should be. But the presence persisted.

Syd searched around the nightstand and the surrounding floor of the bedroom for his cellphone. In a shadow left by the downdrawn shades, he saw his phone lying on the edge of the nightstand. When he reached for it, his fingers resisted the muscular command to grip inward, and the rectangle of stainless steel and scratch-resistant glass tumbled from his hand and landed with barely a noise onto the carpet. Syd leaned out of bed to lift his phone. Wanting new thoughts, he unlocked the screen and entered new searches.

- requirements for kidney donate

- health requirements to donate kidney

Holding his phone sideways to keep his head laid on the pillow, Syd scrolled down with his dry, roughened fingertip. He could still sense the airy, metallic smell of rain on his skin, even as the warmth fused to him like solder. He did not read many of the search results, as the exhaustion that swamped his eyes kept their lids yearning to be closed. Instead, he watched the letters, as though they could move on their own. Like the wind between the rain, the information flowed between every symbol, and Syd's interest writhed among them. In partially reading the results, in immersing himself in the information, he had a shred of hope, a single angle of perception from which the future made sense. Fascination caught on him like toiled fire, burning even more intensely for being caught within his body only, his brain only. It felt correct. It was his purpose for living.

The sound of the water pouring in the shower in the adjoining room shut off. The pipes squealed with tightness, and in the next few seconds, the music from Janis's phone shut off as well. Syd closed

every tab he had opened, swiping them into electronic nothingness. He opened his search history, and tapped two buttons, an invitingly blue one, asking what it was he wanted to do, and a crimson button that confirmed that it was what he really wanted. The search history was empty now, only a pale field on the screen, like a face without orifices. Somehow, it felt even more suspicious like that, so effortfully barren. Syd turned off his phone screen and laid the device face-down on the nightstand, reaching his arm out to push it even slightly farther, that it would appear he hadn't been using it at all and had only just awoken. He retracted his arm to himself and sank into his bed.

He did not blame Janis for what she wouldn't understand. Syd thought that it was a testament to how well he understood her, that he knew she wouldn't want to find out what he was looking into. She would think that it was irresponsible, she would tell him that it was a frightening prospect, any number of reasons why not. It was not an immediate problem. The matter was just that Janis would not understand. Syd knew that Janis lacked the same driving dissatisfaction that he had. She was content in her life, and for that, Syd was proud of her. This was his own personal emptiness, his own matter to deal with, and she would be best to leave it to him, just as he left Janis to hers.

Janis came back into the bedroom, her body tensed by the morning chill. She held her limbs close, preserving the warmth in their blood. A wide towel encircled her torso, and her cornrowed hair wrapped around her neck like a torc, tapering at the ends. Her face looked serene, and her eyes glanced at the room like the lenses of a camera, constantly shuttering new photographs of light from yet unseen angles. Even Syd felt intricately pixelated under her gaze, bisected by her eyes.

"You should probably get up," Janis said, with a voice deep and wine-like.

"I know," Syd said. He lifted himself upright in the bed, pulling himself with only the sinews of his stomach. He honed his focus onto the muscles enwrapping his skull, keeping closed his lips with significant effort, so as not to groan with the pain that sitting up had suddenly caused him. Something inside of him still felt as though it was pulling him down, a longing to remain still.

The thought of laying down, horizontal on a bed, his eyes affixed toward a ceiling, brought his mind to the idea of the kidney operation. How frequently he had envisioned it had made it feel familiar to him, like a memory turned the wrong way around in time.

The bed would be a comfortless table, with anesthetic instead of morning air, and the day that it would happen would be the first day in years to have actually meant something. Where Janis stood, telling him to get out of bed, a surgeon would be preparing his instruments, telling him to lay down and take deep breaths. Janis would be somewhere, and by the time Syd went under surgery, he would have assuaged all of her worries already. She would have her own matters to tend to. He would be in the hospital for a cluster of days, some lump of a week after the donation, then recovering for another two months, which he could probably whittle down to one month if he kept up his exercise regularly. It would hurt, but it would save him time.

Janis cleared her throat, and Syd could not determine if she was trying to get his attention or had some bout of the morning dryness in her mouth. Whatever the reason was, Syd attuned all attention to her, besieging her entire body with his clear eyes.

“Was your run alright last night?” Janis asked, almost declaratively. “It was raining.”

“It was,” Syd agreed, lowering his legs onto the flattened carpet of the bedroom. The calloused soles of his feet could not feel the fibers. He knew what the carpet felt like through years of mornings in ceaseless routine.

“All three miles, in the rain?” Janis asked. Her voice was rising as though ready to scoff, but her waveform words sounded of concern.

“Yep,” Syd stated.

Janis almost smiled, not out of any humor but out of a sudden burst of ridicule.

“That doesn’t sound pleasant,” she observed.

“It isn’t supposed to be, that’s how you know it’s working.”

Without use of his arms, Syd attempted to stand up, but his sense of balance spun inside of him. His nerves and muscles felt tangled. Exerting his legs had made his head start to pound from inside, with

countless unatonable pains, attempting to express. Syd allowed himself to wince. His insides felt frayed. With the first unbinding of his lungs in the moment that he stood up, a rapturous cough swept through Syd's mouth, disturbing the silence and pulling it apart, gasp by gasp.

He lowered back down onto the bed. Hoisting her towel higher on her chest, Janis sat down on Syd's lap, her head turned to look at him with eyes like ringing alarms as Syd's own excitement started motoring in him.

"I think maybe you should take tonight off," she said.

"Off from what?"

Janis leaned her head forward, her face twisted on its corners with perplexity.

"Off from running," she clarified.

Syd felt an intrusion, rattling his chest like a metal pick, raking the insides of a lock. It took a moment to understand, to extrapolate the confusion from Janis's words. She did not know, and she would not be able to understand. To explain it now would have been a waste, for all the arguing that it would lead to, and Syd refuted the idea. He pitied Janis, that was why he wanted not to explain to her right now. It would be a waste of both of their breaths.

"It's just from waking up," Syd replied, throwing his lungs into his words like the foaming edge of an ocean flitting through barrier-rocks, as his arms encircled Janis and his lips briefly entrapped her ear. "That's all."

Janis's voice retreated into her mouth, and in her eyes, Syd saw a desire to look away, even as they locked upon him. Janis's crossed arms fell down to her sides, and her fingertips walked along Syd's valleyed chest and pectorals. Under Janis's touch, Syd felt stronger, his body more capable of routing any resistances that it might meet.

"Okay."

Syd leaned with his elbows on his desk, and his head rested atop them both, pressing his body together. In the tension, Syd leaned back, recurving his back around the low top of his chair, and reversing the pull in his chest. He let loose another scour of coughs from his throat, each one fricatively burning his neck and lungs. Each heaving cough felt like another inch that his esophagus was being pulled inside out and swallowed back down again, as though it were a piston of flesh running through him, greased by mucus and unstoppable salivating. But in the office, surrounded by others at the surrounding desks, Syd knew that his coughing needed to be silent, and thus that much more excruciating for all the effort it took to tighten his diaphragm.

The insurance claim front of him, timed in the bottom corner for how long he had kept his computer mouse idle, stood tall on his screen, unmoving. It was simply there, and its presence was a timed matter, to exist for as little as could possibly be measured. Syd switched which of his elbows he coughed into, for his available hand to click a button rejecting the form, and then another to select the one option for the reason the form needed to be rejected. Another form replaced it, so brilliantly fast that only the scanned and compressed signature at the bottom of the form, and which tiny boxes had been etched with check marks, seemed to be the sole features of it that made it any different.

There was not much to look at. Syd's irises slid around when his eyes closed. His eyes felt hot with friction, but his head was light with threadbare thoughts. When in the office, perception felt like more of an activity, a task of endurance, even more so now with the presence that Syd felt over him and atop him. It was like a weight, pushing backward on his gut, no matter if he was sitting, standing, or supine. It felt like a negation of himself, a supplantation of him from within his body.

Syd leaned forward on his elbows again, blocking the view of his computer screen from the woman in the desk behind him. She was preoccupied with her own computer, but Syd was aware of the risks of being caught wasting time, and the unreliability of others for any corroboration. Veiling the sight of his screen with his back, Syd opened more tabs, each one with a new search query, filled in time for the previous one to load, then added upon by another.

-physical requirements of donating a kidney

-kidney donation health screening

-what health issues disqualify kidney donors

Syd's eyes scanned the search results, stopping upon specific words only for the semi-second needed to know whether or not it was useful. He had only a couple moments that he could sit like this, from both the conspicuity of blocking his computer screen, and the pain that wove through his ribs, screeching in silence for Syd to sit flatly.

The two sentiments converged, and one by one, Syd closed out all the tabs, returning to his form and the timer, which now displayed an uncomfortable large number, a span of time that he had so direly prolonged but still left with no work done. All he had reaped for his efforts was a number climbing higher, and slowly. To reset the timer, he needed to accept or reject the form, and as he had been told during his training, he rejected the form in the face of uncertainty, with an imperative rush. For the required reason, Syd clicked on whichever was on the topmost place on the drop-down menu. Whether or not it was a necessary reason to reject an insurance claim, or whether it qualified for rejection for that reason, were both unanswerable matters now, because of two eviscerating clicks of a mouse. Onto some disembodied name somewhere in the state, he had unloaded the burden of his negligence, and they would be the one paying for their hospital visit in entirety.

Every day was another relinquishment of Syd's self-control, another squandering of his time. Syd wanted control over his own conscious time. The donation would give him that, if only for a few weeks, but in preparing for it, Syd had found some control. And during the nights, he found where time was the most malleable, most unbound. There were no other eyes on him during his night-runs. Even the buildings and roads slumbered, breathing in unison. When running, Syd could contract at will and elongate at will; himself, the city, the very flow of time, Syd could move all of them.

Spots of sweat, like puddles trapped on a pitted street, covered Syd's forehead. More coughs raided his throat, too many at once to keep his lips shut. Syd tried intentionally to louden them, forcing them together to perhaps spare the time needed to pathetically gasp for air. Even below such sweat, he felt his skin grow cold, as though in physical remembrance of his night-run in the rain and the freezing wind.

A blot of warm phlegm accumulated in his mouth, and with vomitous disgust, Syd spit it out onto his sleeve. The force of the cough had broken the lump of mucous, and it spread across the fabric of his sweater. The smell, almost like spittle, made Syd recoil from his own arm. As he lowered his arm to his side to scrape the yellow sludge from his sleeve onto the underside of his chair, he saw streaks of red among the phlegm, narrow seepages of blood. Syd felt the cold from last night once more, as clearly as though the autumn chill had become a new sixth sense of his.

That evening, Syd leaned with one arm on the table in the dining room, his head so heavy that he felt as though his forearm would snap underneath it like an overweighted support-beam. Sweat had been pooling on his forehead, and the cold gripped at his muscles like predatory jaws around him. He shook his arm, pulling his shoulder into a tremor, but that did nothing to shed the cold and the sweat. Between the heat and the chill, his body felt wrong, his skin malformed to his bones, his mind rejected from his cranium.

When his shoulder trembled, he turned it slightly away from the other side of the table where Janis was seated, so that she would not see it.

With his arm already concealed behind his torso, Syd dug his cellphone out from his pocket, folded in his twisted abdomen and seated legs. He turned on the phone screen and rushed to type.

-symptoms of pneumonia

-effects of pneumonia on kidneys long term

“What are you doing?” Janis asked. Syd gripped around the flattened black prism of his phone, holding the power button on the side fast until the device shut down completely. He pushed it back down into the folds of his pocket.

“Nothing,” he said. “Work was bothering me.”

Janis’s expression, like an endless stream of dust falling over the craters of her skull and jaw, fixed onto Syd. She was not looking at him— she was looking around him, as though addressing

something else that was hiding behind his back. She did not appear suspicious, but only discerning, like the unmovable sky between the high-rise buildings.

“You can’t take one sick day?” Janis asked, with suppliance honed upon anger.

“I’m not sick,” Syd replied.

With the manner that his consonants clicked in the back of his throat, like a filthy chittering insect, had made Syd more aware of every single word that made it out of his mouth. It was not only his words that the watchful Janis was dissecting, but his voice as well. Syd swallowed. He stroked his flank through his shirt, on the skin where he estimated his kidney might be buried. His thumb trailed over his side, upward and down, reminding himself that soon the emptiness would be filled, that his life would have some substance, that the conflux of his blood and the drawing of his breaths would actually mean something to the world. That he would make a single difference in the lonely maelstrom of the city.

Janis would not understand. Syd knew that he lied to her because he wanted her not to worry further, to not stoke her incalculable anxieties. His lies were expressions of love, and as such they felt natural, warranted by every thread of his life-drive. Every desire that Syd felt, was in some way dependent on Janis not knowing, at least not now.

“You need to stay in tonight,” Janis said. Her concern sounded wrathful now, her words acutely pointed.

Syd stood up. The motion gutted him.

“Why don’t you want what’s best for me, Janis? Why?” he said. His creaky voice, his thoughts all backstitching into one another, Syd could not direct his words as much as he swung them, like a sledgehammer in a momentous arc.

Janis looked at him, without focus, without intent, only in a vast incomprehension, a fundamental state of not knowing. Her eyes met Syd as though he had just extracted all her memories from her, bundled them all together, and broke them over his knee.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Janis asked.

Syd had expected nothing more. It was the utter predictability with which Janis spoke, even down to the intonation between her words, her miniscule breaths, the way her voice brimmed gluttonously with sweet-scented air that infuriated Syd.

“I’m going out,” Syd said. “If I stay here right now, something will happen that I don’t want. I need to go clear my head.”

Syd wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. Still, he could detect the stench of phlegm from his shirt, the sickening bloody smell.

It was almost dusk, and the sunlight was dimmed and diffused in the haze of evaporating rain puddles. Syd ran slowly at first, with an uneven gait which he corrected by exerting different sides of his body with different allocations of his strength. It had taken much effort to straighten himself, and his run was skewed with the misdistribution of his weight, but he was moving and accelerating, and thick-feeling blood still coursed in his arteries.

The hour was growing late, but the sun still stuck in the sky like a pink infection. People still roamed the streets, the aluminum and glass doors all still filter-fed upon them. The windows were still vigilantly lit from unknowable interiors. People were watching Syd as he ran his route; he knew it. Hot sweat trickled into his eyes and mouth. Chills overtook him between every step. Although the sky was still clear and barren, the sudden bursts of discomfort that drizzled down from Syd’s head felt almost like cold rain.

The fresh open air felt inebriating. To run again was a merciful delight, that was tainted and marred with the presence of others, through the miraging humid air. Even the wide lanes and streets of Maro Park felt congested, struggling to breathe continuously.

To be seen was to be cut through. Syd felt portions of himself lost under the countless eyes, he felt himself robbed of his autonomy and self-control. He was seen by hundreds, perhaps even thousands, all of whom did not know him. He would make no difference in the interplay of their lives. He would be

seen, then disregarded. To run was a strategy, eliminating as much time as possible that he could be perceived, to do away with that incongruity; taking up the time of others and making no difference.

Syd felt his insides roiling, his mouth prying itself open to take in as much breath as could be extracted from the miry summer air. Running had blurred all the faces around him, and turned every pair of eyes into doubled streaks of color. Even his running-route was barely recognizable in the daylight. With people around, the streets felt chokingly tight.

Syd nearly ran directly into another man front-wise, and only evaded him with a nimble cross of his legs, keeping his momentum forward, down off the curb and into the street, where a car pulled to a sudden stop in front of him, its brakes squealing like a threatened animal. The closeness had hurt more than any impact would have, and the fear of any cessation of himself was more painful than the ever-growing symptoms of cessation within him now.

Syd sprinted around buildings, as the sun lowered in the sky, always changing directions around him but maintaining its descent into evening. The crowds all tapered out, into the buildings like raindrops. Syd could not determine how long he had been out, but the sky was growing darker each time he looked up, and his breath had begun to ripple and tremor in his mouth, like narrow clawing clouds. His head slammed, and his eyesight wavered with it. In the nightfall, the streetlights all hummed on, looking down on him like angelic eyes out of the mist. He thought about Janis once more. The way that she spoke, the manner with which she thought, how well he could recall it to mind as though he carried a portion of herself with him in the depths of his sensation. She was always present, even when she was not with him.

Syd had made a difference to one life already, and had every single moment that he was with her. In the corner of the city that the two of them once occupied, Syd had once brought her joy. Perhaps she still held some of that aged happiness, from their early years together, just as Syd held a part of her voice despite his anger. His life had made some difference, once. He would not need to donate a kidney for that.

The street was quiet, arable for memory, and the night was long and warm with fog. The darkness was uniform for all hours of the night. Syd looked up at the starless sky, and closed his eyes. His thoughts went quiet.

A light screamed from somewhere, and out of the sickening miasma, Syd felt his feet leave the ground. The pain all cast itself to one side of his body. He opened his eyes from instinctive, survivalistic shock. For a second, the feet of his shadow on the asphalt were entirely disjoined from the ground, and the whole shadow was a strange, self-enclosed shape, entirely his body and nothing more. In the agonizing equilibrium of the air, his shadow was a peaceful sight, proof of his own existence.

Syd crashed back down onto the street, as tires skidded away over the puddles, with a distant whispering sound. Syd's body failed to move when his muscles willed it. His will atrophied, as Syd lay flat on his back in the street, his bones skewering his organs, blood bubbling in his mouth as he strove to breathe. He looked up at the night sky, at time passing overhead, another sightless night. As his eyes began to dim, Syd could see the stars returning to the sky, one by one.

“The Night-Train to Newlocke”

(Winter I)

It was difficult for Gerald Hoy to reconcile that the reflection of his face in the darkened train window was not actually himself. It seemed unrecognizable, but then again, Gerald had not seen his own face often enough recently to know for certain what he looked like. He had not shaved in a few days, he knew that much, and his face was likely sunken from the string of late-night train transfers en route to Newlocke. He felt his dehydrated tongue stick to the back of his teeth; there was another alteration to his face in the reflection. It had been a slow, exhausting night, without a moment of sleep. But even with all those mutations in mind, he still found it hard to believe that his reflection was not him.

He looked over it again, poring over himself. His polo shirt, hastily put on, still had one corner of its collar turned inside out. Gerald adjusted the fabric with the tips of his fingers, his skin dry and slippery from fatigue. He yawed his head toward the window and then forward, inspecting whether his forehead really jutted forward so much. It protruded from his head like the top half of a mask. At the bottom of his face, Gerald’s lips were bright and cracked with the curse of wintertime, which seemed to somehow come earlier every subsequent year. Biting his lips did not help the dryness either. With nothing much to do on the train, Gerald would resort to bodily fidgeting. When he could, he cracked every single knuckle on his hands, but usually all that he had to do was bite off shreds of weak skin from his lips, then spit them out onto his leg and flicking the moist strip of biological detritus away. His lips ached like muscles, well-exerted and weak.

His phone battery was nearly dead, so he relied on the time kept by his body. It took ten minutes for torn lips to close back up, twenty minutes for knuckles to be able to crack again after cracking once, and when Gerald would put two fingers against the soft crater in his neck to check his own pulse, he felt three or four heartbeats every second.

Gerald thought there would be some USB port or wall-outlet on the train to charge his phone with, like how there would be on a plane. But commuter trains had no such thing. The battery icon in the corner of Gerald’s phone screen was red like the inside of a tired eye. Over the past few hours, Gerald had

been considering his reflection, letting his attention slide along the glass like those greasy fucking fingerprints on every single train window. Gerald pulled the sleeve of his jacket up and wiped the inside of the window with a whimpering squeak, until the glass was clear enough again.

He had been considering his reflection. It was not him, but not for lack of resemblance. Every difference, or missed detail, had a reason for being there. Gerald had enough time to divine out features of his own face that would be invisible to anyone else, parts of the skull and the neck that probably didn't even have scientific names. The ridge of skin where the cheekbone met the ear was one of them. The sag of flesh between the voice-box and the place where Gerald checked his pulse was another. Every unexpectedness had an explanation. But still, the reflection was not him. He recognized it, but he felt no familiarity with it. The name "Gerald Hoy" didn't fit the reflection right. It had an expression as though it were feeling something, thinking about something, but Gerald's face was at rest. His reflection did not look like it remembered the things that Gerald remembered.

Gerald thought about why that was. But between the wobbling of the train, the choking-sound of the wheels on the track, the conversation of the people seated a few rows behind him that he could hear but not interpret, and the way that the old man seated across the aisle looked so utterly pathetic as a human—it had all put Gerald off his desire to think.

He rolled his neck, and the stiff muscles all resisted before cracking one by one under the weight of his head. His entire upper body was sore, and below his waist, all was numb. His feet felt swollen, but Gerald knew better than to assume that it was solely because of all the walking he had done tonight. His feet were always like that now. Maybe it was just exhaustion, wringing out each of his limbs. Or maybe he was imagining it completely, alchemizing reasons from exhaustion and boredom. Gerald was not so old yet that he could excuse complaining about his own feet.

Pressing downward onto the floor of the train, Gerald felt the vibrations shake his spine, rattle his teeth, and toss about his tongue in his mouth like a dead body being frisked to check for life-signs.

How ironic, Gerald thought.

The facts of Manny Hoy's existence had been a matter of space, but not time. Even when Manny and Gerald were boys, Manny was the sort of kid to disappear and reappear, calling Gerald from a payphone in another state with a lively shout in his voice. When Manny left for good, Gerald took it as logical that his brother didn't tell him where he was moving off to. Back then there were still payphones and landlines around, so Gerald expected a call. The next time they spoke after that, Manny had gotten married, and was calling from a landline of his own. The next time they spoke after that, Manny told Gerald his wife's name— Quinn— and the name of their daughter— Claire. Manny called from a cellphone, but Gerald kept his landline. The next time they spoke was through Claire, who was now old enough to own the very house she grew up in, and assured Gerald over the phone that sometimes, her father forgets her name too, and it was really nothing to think of as personal. By this time, Gerald had finally gotten himself a cellphone.

There was nothing said about Quinn. That was the elegance of Manny. Every part of his life, no matter how important, had its habit of getting lost.

Claire Hoy had given an address, in someplace named Newlocke, but it had taken some convincing on Gerald's part, as though she didn't wholly believe that Gerald was actually her uncle. She gave in eventually— the frequency that Gerald mentioned Manny's name was enough to convince her. Gerald needed to ask what state Newlocke was in, but by then he had already started walking toward the train terminal. That was this afternoon. Until he retraced the thoughts in his head, Gerald had avoided thinking about the fact that he never told his niece outright that he was coming to visit her. She wouldn't think to expect him from the train station. She would be less than amenable to letting him stay in her father's house— in effect it was her house now— on such short notice.

As Gerald gazed out the window, at his own enlarged reflection of his head over the blocky housing projects and the chain-linked fences sutured in dead vines, he thought about home. His apartment did not feel much like a home. It reminded him of a vacation, some impossible stayaway so protracted that it forgot to end. Gerald lived inside of a thought experiment— when does a place that's been lived in

for decades become a home? When you realize how hard it is to get back to? Or when you realize you don't want to?

Home, as a concept, had been scattered somewhere in the wasteland outside the train window. Home was left behind in the way that an idiot child leaves a toy in a park. The train felt more like home. The vinyl seats felt softer than Gerald's bed. His hunger kept him hotter than any blanket did during any past winter. But their comfort was untrustworthy. There was nowhere that Gerald was supposed to be. Even his skin felt like an uncomfortable rental for his musculature. Every comfort, every feeling, from the cool surface of the window, the smoky smell of winter, the offload of Gerald's weight from his feet—they were temporary. They were loans of sensation, with a cost needing to be reckoned with eventually. At some point, Gerald would have to rationalize exactly what he was doing, and face everything that he had chosen not to expect. The night-train needed to stop in Newlocke.

Or maybe it didn't. Gerald thought about that. He toyed with the idea, bending it the way he bent his fingers to crack his knuckles. The train would continue off to someplace. He was already in a new state, and it was the middle of the night. In a practical sense, he was as far away from home now as he would be whenever the train reached Newlocke, or even whenever the train stopped at its terminus and turned back around. There was no one expecting him. No one remembered him, or would recognize his face or his voice. The only commonality he shared with his niece was a last name and a mutual estrangement. All that obligated him to get off the train existed only in his memory and in his name, where things are so prone to getting lost.

One day that would happen, anyway. It happened to Manny, and it happened to both of their parents consecutively, probably also to their grandparents too, but Gerald couldn't ever know for sure. He suspected it had already begun to affect him too, like it was casing out his brain for weak spots to one day break in through. He didn't remember eating most days, even though he rarely felt hungry. When he thought about what Manny used to look like when he was younger, that version of Manny had the face of an actor in a movie, with features that were harder to forget. It was not what Manny looked like, and

Gerald knew it, even though he should not have been able to. It should have made no difference, the way he thought about Manny. But it did.

Gerald saw the pathetic old man across the aisle, coughing feebly into his fist. The frame of his body was so sunken with age that the arms seemed to fit into the slots below his ribs. His entire spine was hunched and barely seemed to be able to support its own weight, and the man's lips curled in where teeth should have been, giving him a permanent look of slack-jawed penitence. He looked barely human, barely mammalian. If Gerald wanted, he could move to the seat behind the old man and snap his neck in the bend of his elbow. Gerald wondered what that would feel like, to wholly subdue someone else, to be the unstoppable vector of someone else's helplessness. It would almost feel like kinship. Brotherhood, perhaps. Someone else would know how it felt to have the life tapped out of them, like the sap dripping out from a tree. Years and years of Gerald's anger would compress into seconds. Manny's arms had been around Gerald's throat for twenty years, and finally, someone else would know how it felt. But Gerald remained seated where he was, and turned his eyes back the other way.

Outside the train window, cities and towns rushed by, their colors bleeding and shapes distending, as though every structure and place was fleeing from wherever the train was heading. Gerald felt ill— if not from the railway hypnosis, from the slow fear that stalked his mind, that the distance between himself and Newlocke was growing smaller and smaller. When his eyes met their own reflection in the night window, Gerald looked into oblivion. Even if he tried to plan, there would be no progression to it. There was nothing in Newlocke, aside from a pack of strangers that had his last name.

A buzz from Gerald's cell phone shook his leg. Gerald groaned, and squeezed his phone between his swollen-knuckled fingers. He was not used to commuter trains, but he knew that no one spoke on them, much less over the phone, especially not to someone who was not apparently present. He would look insane if he did. There would be no faster way to get the eyes of everyone else in the train-cabin onto him than that. Gerald wanted no more reminders of the fact that he was there.

He turned on his phone screen. He recognized the number; not its sequence, but the way the numbers took form on the screen. It was a number he was used to looking at and deciding whether to dial.

Even with his phone battery down to its last dregs, Gerald answered and held the overheated device up to his ear.

“Hello,” Gerald said, clearly and sharply.

The response was a young woman’s voice, equally clear but slower, like the sound was wading through the audio static of the call.

“Hi, Gerald, it’s Claire Hoy—” she began, before tersely interrupting herself. “It’s Claire.”

Gerald closed his eyes from the glassy night outside, and tried to configure what his niece’s face looked like. He tried imagining Manny, but made younger and with the edges of his skull sanded down and made feminine. Gerald had difficulty remembering what Manny looked like when he was Claire’s age, much less what he would have looked like as a woman. Gerald turned his eye toward the pathetic old man across the aisle. He looked like some stranger’s grandfather, some nobody’s granduncle, with a face that had been generationally replicated and had little left of its own originality. He imagined what the granddaughter of that nameless man would look like, and like so Gerald had a face for his niece.

“Are you there?” Claire asked.

“Sorry, yes,” Gerald answered. He carved out each sound as he voiced it, filing down any harshness until his tone was barely more than a demure whisper. His words were for no one else but Claire. His breath was a scarce, dwindling resource, and exhaustion had strained the grip that his mind had over vocabulary.

“I’m still here,” Gerald said.

“Okay,” his niece answered. She did not feel like his niece. Gerald was no uncle. There were no familial titles that fit him. He never cared for being the son of his parents, knowing what kinds of people they were. He was, at one time, a brother, but like the shredded city outside the train window, that time had long since passed in parallax.

“I wanted to check in with you,” Claire continued. “We stopped all of the sudden when I called earlier. I thought we could discuss what’s actually going to happen.”

Words threw themselves from the slacken space between Gerald’s still-open mouth.

“How have you been?” Gerald asked. The weight of his hot, foul-smelling breath seemed to fall into his lap and pin him to the train with a paralytic hold. His mouth and eyes went dry at once. Gerald folded his thumb underneath his fingers on his free hand and squeezed, trying to extract a crack out of the knuckle joints, but he could not muster the effort. Gerald’s muscles forbade him from any physical reassurance of his own being.

“What?” his niece asked. Over the phone, her confusion had carved out her voice into a high-pitched squeak.

Gerald stayed silent, trying to count one single second, with the hope that he could maybe gather ten of them. Maybe that would calm down the invoiceable thoughts skittering in his head. Gerald began counting one second, but there was no sufficient place to stop. He was not sure how long one second was supposed to be. His phone boiled against his ear, and when Claire spoke, the phone vibrated from its speaker with an uncomfortable breathiness, as though she had been suddenly brought closer— as though faceless niece Claire was right beside him on the train.

“How have you been?” Gerald repeated. “What’s been going on in your life?”

He spoke with the tone he used to greet customers at work, with amiability, imitating the tone of the customer— his niece— just a bit so as to seem friendly, and not so much to be overbearing. The act felt filthy and deceptive, but Gerald couldn’t think of any other way to talk to a niece he had never met. This was family he was speaking to, there should have been no reason for him to use such a false, flimsy tone, yet there was no other tone to use.

A faint shuffling noise came through the phone, sounding as though Claire was moving somewhere before she could answer. With the likelihood of Claire being in Manny’s house— her house— Gerald didn’t think there would be any reason for her to be lowering her voice or bringing her phone closer to her mouth. He couldn’t discern what the sound was, or what reason it had to be there. The house must have been staggeringly silent, with only her inside.

“Considering everything that’s been happening,” Claire said, “I think I’m alright.”

Gerald couldn't tell what he meant. Claire was being reduced to a voice gritted through a phone and beset by the clamoring noises of the train. Her words made sense on their own, but in her voice, Gerald couldn't understand.

"That's good," Gerald said.

"Listen, I just need to know where—"

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Gerald asked, wincing. He tried to put together what he would have sounded like to Claire. Gerald was little more than stranger, a little less than family, asking questions about her that he should either already know or otherwise not need to know at all. They should never need to be asked between family, but it was because they were family that Gerald needed to know. He stifled his own sense of empathy as if holding a long breath.

"No," Claire answered uncertainly.

Gerald struck the side of his head against the train window. The sting of pain webbed out from Gerald's brow onto the entire left side of his head, and a black spot appeared in his eyeline for a few moments before fading. Dense, irritating heat overran where his body had once felt cold. The lanky old man across the aisle turned to face him with a look of pity.

Even after punishing himself, Gerald did not want to stop talking. He wanted to test the limits of his own instinct, to indulge in compulsion, to break decorum. Gerald inhaled through his teeth, biting off a chunk of the silence of the night-train and spitting it back out into the phone.

"Claire," Gerald asked. "How old are you now?"

As the last words left his lips, Gerald raised two fingers on his free hand to the soft spot on his neck where he checked his pulse, and pressed in deeply until he felt a painful tic in his throat, a tiny panic of his body.

Claire sighed. "Twenty-seven. I don't like this, Gerald, I need you to stay on topic and tell me—"

Twenty-seven. It had been close to three decades since Gerald had seen his brother last. Six years short of a third of a century. Gerald had been used to thinking of it as a two-decade span, but of course it

wouldn't stay like that forever. It would have kept growing larger, kept devouring more years. Not anymore.

Gerald chose to hear nothing more. He poured all his attention toward the train window, where distant streetlights and yellow-green apartment windows bled their glare into the starless sky. Without his attention, Claire's words simply were not there.

"You work, right? What do you do?" he asked.

Gerald hung his head and leaned forward against the seat in front of him. He had been talking to his niece like she was a child, with a bombardment of slowly pronounced questions, excising information. But Gerald wanted to know more about his niece, this consanguineous voice. Although he couldn't tell Claire, Gerald wanted to be an uncle.

"Why are you asking me this?" Claire said. Her voice was low, finely channeled with a tone of frustration.

Gerald did not answer. He felt a droplet of sweat gather between his earlobe and the screen of his cellphone, sickly and warm. There was no answer. There were many partial reasons, but there was no answer, because none of the reasons could be spoken. Gerald had never been asked for them before. In twenty— thirty— years, the answers had grown beyond a need for words. Words were for other people, Gerald had no use for them most of the time. The reasons, the primitive answers, weren't meant for his voice, or for Claire's ear.

While one hand held the phone up to his head, Gerald cracked the knuckles on his thumb with his other hand. He bit his lip and reaped out a long strip of dead skin, spitting it onto the floor between his feet. With two fingers, he felt the soft side of his neck for his heartbeat to measure the time with, but he must have been checking in the wrong place, because Gerald felt no pulse in himself. An undisturbed sense of calmness spread across his body, a comfortable stillness, satisfied in its own proxemic space.

Gerald closed his eyes. The city outside, stretched wire-thin through the train windows, disappeared under his eyelids. Even the background noise below the voice of his niece over the phone seemed to soften.

“I’m sorry, Claire,” Gerald said. He inhaled, and exhaled, licking over the torn skin on his lips, realizing in a single instant how long twenty-seven years really was.

No response came from his phone. The heat emanating from the screen seemed to have stopped. The phone felt cooler in Gerald’s grasp— more inert.

“Claire?”

Gerald’s eyes sped to the corners of their sockets, as he brought his cellphone from his ear to in front of himself. With both hands now wrapped around the steel and glass device, Gerald looked down at the reflective black screen, unlit. It reflected the sterile, hospital-like lighting on the train, and it reflected Gerald’s face, divided with mosaic shadows. A swirl of sweat from where he had been pressing the phone to his ear sat on the center of the screen, sparkling and glaring. The battery was dead. Gerald still had not told his niece that he was even coming to Newlocke. He never heard what she was going to ask. The voice, all that he knew of his niece, had been severed without warning. She would not even know why.

Gerald pressed the power button repeatedly. He held it down, counted to three, and released it. He slapped the side of his phone with the palm of one hand, as though the device had slipped into a dark slumber from which it had to be jostled awake. Of course, it did nothing. Gerald felt the phone slip out of his hands and land flatly on the greasy floor of the train. The impact made the dust, hair, and flakes of dead lip-skin on the floor all tremble for a brief moment, and then tacitly, they all settled back down like nothing had fallen at all.

Gerald considered the prospect of leaving the phone there on the floor of the train, for other people to avoid suspiciously, until it would make its way into some garbage bag then into an incinerator. It would go wherever the natural movement of things take it, without protest or input, like how Manny had done.

Gerald leaned his head against the window, with his chin on the air-vent that served at the sill, one eye closed and one nostril pressed shut under the weight of his head. The sparse housing projects had given way to the fanged visage of a cityscape. The urban streak outside kept moving unstopably, adding endlessness atop endlessness, folding and collapsing distances directly into Gerald’s one open eye. Lights

flickered in and out from other parts of the city moving in front of them. Perspective flattened the city and expanded it, enlarged it to unfathomable scales and compressed it to horrifying density. A highway overpass blocked out the lights from a high-rise. Trees, blackened with the lack of light, shrouded the roads going in and out, obscuring them, giving the illusion that the place was a self-enclosed totality.

The announcement system let out a long beep, and the voice of the conductor, a sharp-voiced woman, crackled through the train-cabin.

“Newlocke station is next. Newlocke.”

Even as it phased over his eyes, Gerald thought about none of the monochromatic warp of the city. He did not think about the impossible angles, the deathly straight lines, the absence of pedestrians on the streets. Gerald thought about Claire’s voice, and the way it reminded Gerald of his brother. She did not sound like Manny, but still she reminded Gerald of him. She recalibrated Gerald’s memory of his brother, reawakened it. He remembered Manny— not in the way he thought about him, but in the way he was. In the way Manny would have thought about himself, in the way his daughter would have thought about him. There was no singular Manny Hoy, and there was no singular Gerald.

The train let out a shrieking gasp from its brakes, and the city beyond the window slowed down. Gerald felt himself jerk in his seat, and his hungering stomach felt shaken. He lifted his feet up in front of him on the edge of the seat, and put his face against his knees and his arms around his shins.

The train pulled into the station at Newlocke. Spotted with moth-ridden lights were signs and advertisements, spread along the concrete platform. Down a staircase and a ramp, a mostly empty parking lot spread out between the nearby buildings— short establishments crowned with unlit apartments. Inside were thousands, maybe tens of thousands, in mutual unknowingness with tens of thousands more. Gerald would be an interloper.

The doors of the train opened. A few passengers from around the cabin stood up and made their ways toward the vestibules on either end. Like the train pulling to a halt, thirty years came to an end with a terminating sense of clarity. Every decision of Gerald’s life, every unrealized opportunity, all sorted themselves out.

Gerald had wanted a husband once, so that he could smile at Manny's empty seat at the wedding. Although there was no one in particular who Gerald ever envisioned splitting his life with. Gerald wanted a house of his own, so that he keep a spare bedroom for anyone else in the world except his brother. There were few people who would stay there otherwise, wherever Gerald would be able to afford such a house. Gerald was thankful, every passing year, that he was born the elder of the two brothers, so that he could die first, so Manny might have to explain to his family that it was his fault they never had an uncle. He wanted to abandon Manny, just as Manny had abandoned him, with every effort of his existence. Even still, a part of him wanted to do that to Claire— to leave her in irresolute confusion about the life of her extended family— to bury her in darkness the way she would one day be burying her father— alone.

By now Gerald knew that those were precisely the reasons why he had no family, no house of his own, and why he was still alive. He loved Manny so much that hatred for him was the only reason Gerald had to do anything.

Through the window, Gerald saw the conductor step outside the train and shake her flashlight above her head. But Gerald didn't move, with an exhaustion that was a lifetime coming. Newlocke was no place for him. He wanted to be alone, the way he had been for his entire life, because now he knew how much he deserved it.

With his hands clasped around his knees in front of him, Gerald leaned over and rested sideways on the train seat. The doors shut, and the train picked up speed, away from Newlocke, away from everything. Maybe in a few hours, the train would terminate and turn back around, and Gerald would be back home, but he did not know. He would still be there, confined to himself. Everyone else was free of him. As he lay on the seat, his face against the vinyl, Gerald could see no more of the city, no more of his reflection in the vacant sky. Gerald closed his eyes, and one by one, he cracked all the knuckles on each hand until his fingers could bend no more.

Claire Hoy tapped her fingers on the steering wheel of her car, and cracked her jaw, miming some words— she was unsure what exactly. Another train had pulled in and slunk off into the distance with a low, swooping drone. The few who meandered off the train walked in every other direction except toward her car, in the parking lot next to the stairs by the train platform. It had been enough hours, and enough trains had passed through. Her uncle was not coming. Finding that her fingers had slipped off her car keys, she grabbed their metal base again and twisted them in the ignition until the car vibrated awake. On her keys hung a metal keychain, shaped into three letters, conjoined in cursive. C.G.H. Claire Geraldine Hoy.

She turned the car around, and with a single bend of her ankle, she started her drive back home on her own. The empty road and sky reflected off one another in the windshield of her car, and in the rearview mirror, Claire caught a glimpse of her reflection. For a fraction of a moment, Claire was afraid, because that face in her reflection did not look like her own.

“Nor’easter”

(Winter II)

Her fingers, like wet leaves, felt over the vertex between the wall and the corner of her bed. She realized how short her nails were, that she had been chewing on them again without realizing. But she could not remember. The notion of her gnawing and grinding at her nails replaced the memory of her having done it. She did not remember feeling the slippery abrasion of keratin under enamel radiating through her head, but she knew exactly what it would feel like, and maybe that was enough that she would not need to remember at all.

“How’s the wind out there, do you see anything?” he asked. The way he spoke interested her. He fidgeted with his voice, inspecting every sound with a nervous stringency. His words were painstakingly enunciated, and as she heard them, she wondered if that was something that he wanted her to notice, or if she wasn’t supposed to be thinking about it.

“No,” she answered. Swinging one side of her body, she turned over to face him. The dry air on her body made the droplets of her sweat feel cold. The bedsprings laughed underneath them both. Lifting one leg, she pressed the sole of her foot on top of his ankle. She wanted distance within the closeness, to be near and far at the same time. She thought that the distance would prove something to herself, but she was not immediately sure what.

Outside, the wind stampeded, releasing a rattling screech from the trees and the cables. The storm was a sound of total, omnipresent motion, tearing away the stillness that the suburbs of Newlocke usually existed in. But inside the house, the storm meant nothing.

“Did you enjoy it?” he asked. Again, his voice was carefully—butcherously—cut, and his throat strained with that effort. She remembered him saying those exact words, in that exact pronunciation, some time a few days ago. But that kind of repetitiveness was probably not something she should be thinking about, so she tried not to. But the thoughts kept going. When she pushed one thought away, the negative space it left behind was a perfect mold for another one just like it.

She made the decision to smile. She reached her arm onto the crevice of his back, and felt for his spine. Her fingers trailed up and down, pushing down the hair on his back.

“Yeah,” she said. “I did.”

She saw him smile as well, his face angular and asymmetrical like the surface of a split stone. The wind picked up outside, its sound growing more distant as it approached, as though it was an echo of its own being. It reminded her of something. Again, she was not sure what.

“Your hair is so fucking red,” she informed him. As she reached for the hair above his temple, she understood how it felt to have short nails again, the way the thousandfold strands on his head all pressed against the meager space of her fingertip, tugging at her nerves, begging to be experienced.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Redheads are supposed to have brown, or orange hair, or some shit like that. It’s not actually supposed to be red.”

“I know,” he answered, still smiling, still skinning his words partway between his teeth. “But it is. It’s recessive. That means it’s rare.”

“Colors are weird like that,” she said.

“Like what?” he asked, although with a voice as though mocking. She knew that was not the way he meant it, but the tone still sounded like ridicule. It was twangy, roguish. She used to think it was attractive, and in all honesty with herself, she partly still did. Maybe that vintage attraction was the reason she never told him about the way that it sounded, even though whenever he spoke like that, she would always wince a little bit.

“The way it works is,” she said, “the color that you see something as, is actually the one wavelength of light that it can’t absorb. So it reflects it back out.”

Illustrating with her hands, she spread out her fingers in front of his face, collecting his red hair and her shortened fingernails into one single optic.

“Really,” she concluded, “the color that you see is the color that something isn’t.”

“Weird,” he said.

Even as she spoke it, she realized her error in explaining the paradox of color. But it sounded nice, so there was no need to correct herself. She turned the thought in her mind, titling it, letting all of its sensical components tumble and collide. Nothing was supposed to make sense, she thought. That was how the real world operated. Logic was a crude transliteration of the sounds that life made. Someone had told her once that you need a little bit of delusion to go through life, the way a cake needs salt.

A knock spat out from the door to the bedroom. Its faint echo rang between all the walls, coming down into her ears and his in all directions, like heavy water spiraling down a hole. Her mother called her name, from outside. She looked over the back of his shoulders, at the pale, splintery door, and the shadow underneath it.

Under her gaze at the door, she saw the man scramble below the tangle of bedsheets and blankets, and cover himself up to his neck, muttering and swearing under his sour-smelling breath.

“Mom, please don’t come in,” she called out.

“I won’t,” her mother responded sleepily. “I’m just letting you know, I left the flashlights and the matches on the table, and I closed all the windows. Don’t go outside tonight, baby.”

“I won’t, mom,” she answered. Her mother called forth the man’s name.

“You know how to get to the basement, yes?” she asked him. She spoke both slower and faster than when she spoke to her daughter. Each successive word flowed quickly, in a panicked cadence, but the syllables were pulled and protracted, as though she was talking to a child.

“Yes,” he answered, nearly whimpering. “Thank you.”

The woman pulled the covers over herself as well, stopping at her kneecaps, just to feel a sense of movement, and stir the dry air. She wanted her frustration to herself. Frustration felt warm, hearth-like, and to keep the irritated feeling to herself made it a perpetual self-sufficient entity, never to be lost. It felt like a waste for emotions to go away with time. But that was how it was, feelings were all excretory. In that way, they were a biological process. Digested food in the stomach too long fosters infection and contagion, feelings unpurged in the head for too long turn a person into an infection upon others.

“I saw on TV,” the woman’s mother started again, “the snow isn’t supposed to start until after midnight. So, you go and wake me up if you go down to the basement. Yes?”

“Yeah,” the woman said. “I will.”

“I love you. No one loves you like I do, okay?”

“I love you too, mom. Good night.”

The footsteps receded, the carpet in the hallway mewling underneath them. From her room, the woman heard the sound of another door squealing closed, and then silence, proliferating through the house, giving way to the rending winds outside.

The man lowered the blanket to his own kneecaps, leveling its edge with the woman’s. He snaked his arm around her shoulders, under her head. With effort, she pressed the side of her head down onto the inner of his elbow. Ideally, he would know that she enjoyed it, and he would not know that she knew that he wanted to know that she enjoyed it. Any true enjoyment of hers was in service of this balance, like a single snowdrift in a storm. Her contentment would proof that the balance was kept. And storms don’t stop because one single snowdrift doesn’t follow its course.

“So, will we need to go down to the basement?” he asked.

“Most likely, no. But you know how she is.”

The man grimaced slightly and visibly. She wished she had not noticed it. But her eye was discerning tonight, more so than any other time. Her attention felt wider, like a muscle grown out from microfracture.

“Why do you say that about her?” the man asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered, reeling down her voice into a whisper. “She is just an alarmist sometimes. She worries. I don’t want to be like her. I’m sure you don’t want to be like your father, right?”

The man shimmied closer to her, and she leaned her head back, moving from the bend of his elbow to the palm of his hand, retaining a formation of close and careful distance.

“You’re not going to be like her,” the man assured her.

“Like I said. We probably won’t need to go down to the basement.”

“That’s good,” the man said.

“No, it isn’t,” the woman replied. “There’s still a chance we’ll have to.”

“But most likely, we won’t. It never snows here.”

“Still. There’s always a risk of that.”

The man shuffled his legs below the blanket, bringing them up to his waist.

“It’s getting colder now,” he said.

With his free hand, he caressed the woman’s midsection, kneading it with the gentle pommel of his wrist. She inhaled deeply, and her every nerve felt it, as though the oxygen in her blood carried with it some of the dust from the air she breathed. Her whole body bore the proof of her continued, singular life. She exhaled, and leaned her forehead against that of the man, their skulls meeting with a soft clap. In balance, she retracted her feet from on top of his so as not to overheat in each other’s company. She bent her knees and crossed her shins, putting her feet away from the man.

She thought about what the man might have wanted. His signals suggested closeness, but there needed to be something more. As she looked him over again, she was careful not to linger her sight on any part of him, nor to stare, nor to blink too regularly, in case he was looking over her as well. But maybe that was a fallacy. Maybe he noticed nothing. He wouldn’t even know whether he was paying attention, so how could she expect to know. His body formed the very alphabet of happiness. Or perhaps it too was all arranged, all laid out just for her to read. Even he didn’t seem like he knew.

She asked herself why she assumed that he would be looking for the same signs that she looked for on him. She was looking for her own signs, her own indications, transplanted onto him. Perhaps she had her own tells that he picked up on. She might have had some minor tic or habit whose unconsciousness proved its authenticity. She laid completely still, with her head still pressed on his arm and her own hands still beached upon the mattress. That stillness might have been her tell. How would she know, she asked herself.

She was not sure what he was looking for at all; then again, neither did she know what she was looking for. Her attention bounded off of the man, and onto the room.

It was the bedroom she'd had since childhood, with walls of stained beige, a popcorn ceiling littered with tiny shadows, and ancient heat, never to be released. The room was always hot, even at the brunt of a winter storm. It was the same heat she had felt since childhood; a shrapnel fragment of youth, embedded in her until she and him might have enough to live on their own. The bedroom was an amnion, someday to be grown out of.

The wind outside swooped and charged between the houses, diving into the narrow gaps between the downtown high-rises and apartment buildings in the distance. The window rattled. From somewhere in the house, a wall groaned as though awakened. She tried not to hear. She thought about that experiment, of a sound made with no one around to hear it, and she sampled a bit of paradox for herself. She heard nothing. Even if the sound continued, she would not hear it. Her scattered attention had passed it over. It amazed her, even now, the speed and totality with which things could disappear when not thought about.

She stroked the side of the man's face, to feel the shortness of her fingernails again. She put her fingertip in her mouth, and closed her teeth around the brink of her nail. It was short enough that the slime and plaque from the surface of her teeth slicked against her fingertip, striking nothing at all.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"No," she said, "I'm just seeing something."

"There's nothing to be nervous about," he offered, extending his voice as though it was an arm rooted inside of him, reaching forth at her in consolation. As the sound poured itself down into her ear, she rested her head in the palm of his hand, and she thought about placement. Everything in the room was where it should be, that she could see from under her own tousled hair: the picture frames still hung with narrow channels of exposed wall slithering between them, and the brushy long-dead plants still crowned the edge of her desk, and the entirety of the room was still so clean that it hurt to look at. The space was shaven and scoured of dirt, loose items, and waste. It was her and him that were out-of-place within it. As she laid there, limbs strewn, her breath dry, she felt like the absent litter. Her sweaty head was resting on somebody's palm like a decomposing lump.

But it was not somebody's hand. It was his hand, and she scolded herself for not having thought that. In her frustration, words sparked out on the edge of her tongue, slipping in the dense air.

"I shouldn't be here," she said. The words did not make sense together. The regret came through her like a moment of sleep and eternity of waking up. She curled her neck and put her head over her chest, feeling like an animal protecting its vitals.

The man reached behind her, and lifted her side of the blanket up to her waist, then up to her shoulder-blades. Her skin felt scalding, but she did not move. Any movement, any assertion of existence, meant that time was still moving forward past the moment of her regret and there was nothing she could do about it.

"I shouldn't be here," she said again.

The man leaned close to her, pulling her close by the center of her back. For balance, she distanced her head from him.

"Hey," he said, "Of course you belong here. This room is ours."

She pressed her soft fingertips into the palms of her hands, under the blanket and out of sight. She was used to the feeling of her nails biting into her flesh when she did this. But with skin against skin, it felt like powerless gumming. Even in the fragility she felt, she was too weak to break herself.

She did not want to break herself. She wanted to break into herself, to find whatever synapse in her brain was responsible for calibrating her attention, and tear it out like the faulty cable it was. She wanted to stop feeling the differences between now and any other moment, any other night. She wanted to live without needing to think about each moment usurping the last.

It was the storm. It blocked out the view of the city, stitching the sky outside too closely to the ground. With the whole outside cloaked in fog, she had no more frame of reference for how much physical space she took up.

The man pulled himself closer, and brought both of his arms around her; one around the back of her head, one around her flank. He curled his leg atop hers, and brought the top of her head below his

chin. To maintain a sense of balance, she curled her entire body into itself, becoming smaller and harder to detect.

“Come here,” he said. “It’s cold.”

“What if it doesn’t work out?”

“It’s okay. We don’t even know what will happen. It was only this once, right? We’ve been safe about it every other time, what would be the chances it happens now?”

“There are no chances!” she declared, the echo scintillating in the air enwrapped between their two bodies. “Either it’ll happen, or it won’t.”

She knew that she was not supposed to have said anything. None of it even made sense, and that should have been proof enough. Speaking it made nothing feel better. Nothing made more sense now than before, because there was now nothing that he was supposed to say in response. Everything needed a response. Every signal needed an echo, that was the way it worked. Responses were how she was sure that she had said anything, and that the thoughts hadn’t gotten so used to being in her head that she had forgotten to even speak them at all. Every word was its elaborate game of implications and expectations, of mutual knowledge and mutual ignorance. In that game, every syllable was a new rule, every silence was a new condition of losing.

She was a cast of herself. What she considered to be herself was little more than her own memories and expectations, endlessly replicated and painted lifelike over years and years of self-attunement. She translated her entire being for him. Without his recognition, she felt as though she did not exist. It was wrong, she knew it was wrong, but that was the way it had been, even before the two had met.

As she stared into his glassy black pupils, as she saw her own reflection etched upside down on his brain, she found the possibility, unrealizable though it was, that he felt the exact same way about her. In his blank countenance, she saw her own vacancy in him. They were two shadows in dimensionless overlap. Maybe that would be enough.

“It will all be alright,” he said. “You’ll see.”

She said nothing. In their shared unknowingness, she still felt as though she knew him better than she had known anyone else.

“I love you,” he said. “I’ll always be with you. Always.”

Outside, the wind receded. The sounds of rattling all steadied. Even the clouds seemed to have stopped moving. Specks of snow began to fall outside the window. The snow was made impossibly paler by the countless lights, all still on in windows throughout the city, as hundreds of thousands of eyes watched the snow fall. A placid and monumental silence spread over the city of Newlocke like wings in flight.

“The Trash Painting”

(Spring)

It was a warm and clear evening, that Vivian had spent in the garbage. One of the first tasks of her night-job was to sort through the cardboard recycling behind Maro Park Apartments, somewhere in east Newlocke; she didn't know the area exactly, but it was in the poorer bit of the nicer part of the city.

The night had followed in similar step with all other nights this week, looking as though the sky might rain, or emanate thunder, or even just slip off the surface of the planet, but there was no rain, of course. Vivian hated that myth about the city. Newlocke was the city where it was always pleasant and everyone knew it; the mountains to the north kept all their snow-gusts contained, and the coastal winds preferred the piney flatlands to the south over Newlocke's few meager hills. Vivian hated that stereotype of her city, because she enjoyed the temperateness; no matter what sorts of things happened indoors, no matter what conversations happened indoors, she could go outside and find expectable weather, able just as easily to cool her as to warm her up, and she could always be sure that no one outside would be talking.

Under a dimming sunset, pink like a tired eye, Vivian waded through a tide of cardboard, with their edges and corners grasping at her shins and making her strides as angular as the boxes were. Vivian didn't like the idea of being assimilated, even if only by folds of cardboard. She didn't like the way the boxes grabbed her, how they pinched her personal space. But this was everything that bothered her about her nightshift working behind Maro Park. Every part of the job felt as though she was not supposed to be there. Her reflective vest that hung on her shoulders like dull plumage, the ever-grey shadow from the apartment towers, the noises from the street, they all felt wrong to notice. They tugged at her attention, tantalized it. She felt uneasy just having her eyes open.

Work gave Vivian time to fidget, occupying her primary mental functions so that she could have her thoughts to herself. Breaking down boxes, filtering scraps of garbage, scrubbing floors and sweeping corners, at least they all let her do something, anything, she could be alone during them all.

She shut her eyes for a moment and sealed her lips around the dry spring-time air. The stench of garbage, dense and oily, poured into her nose like backflowing mucus. The sound of an insect shot by her

ear. She gripped her knife by her side, and ran her gloved thumb up and down along the back of the blade. Even through the grip of her glove, Vivian felt sticky tape-residue on the metal. That feeling of ever-so-slight stickiness was something that only she would know about. Vivian lowered her thumb onto the adhesive slime on the side of the blade, and lifted it back off, pulling her glove until the stickiness released. That tape-residue was enough to hold herself together.

Vivian leaned down, exhaling at just the right time to counteract the feeling of pain in her lower back, and picked up another box. It was nearly square on each side, and aside from a mangled shipping label, the cardboard surface was a featureless shade of brown. The box felt cheap and crushable, so it wouldn't take up too much space in the dumpster. Maybe tonight, she would be lucky enough that it wouldn't be overfilled, and her supervisor wouldn't need to whine to her about leaving recycling outside when the dumpster ran out of space.

Vivian flipped the box upside down with a single turn of her wrist. Pressing one side against the brick wall, she slid her blade down the tape on the bottom of the box, opened the flaps of cardboard, and cut the remaining straggling tape with two licks of her knife. She folded each flap down neatly, and pressed in with her thumbs to fold it in half a second time; this was easier to do with cheap boxes. She flung the folded cardboard into the top of the recycling dumpster, and picked up another box.

Every other one this evening had been a challenge of annoyance— either too thick to bend, or so thin that it warped, or stuffed full of candy wrappers and condoms that needed to be poured into the garbage nearby. To have broken down one single box so elegantly almost felt like a trick. Vivian imagined that she was being silently watched, putting on a performance of normalcy. Her life had taught her that when things seemed to be going right, she must have been doing something wrong.

There was not much noise, aside from the blare of cars, fading into and out of one another. Every few minutes, Vivian thought she could hear a trickle of conversation from the apartment windows above, but never any words— that was her problem, she knew. Words just sounded like noise sometimes, even from close by. She remembered the way things used to be, all the repeated words, the raised voices, the multiplying mistakes and misunderstandings brought on because one single syllable evaded her hearing.

Usually, it had resulted in raised voices, because usually, they didn't realize that Vivian's problem wasn't with speaking level, but with words themselves. And it wasn't worth it for Vivian to correct them, most of the time.

The shade under Maro Park Apartments grew darker, and the air felt damp and musty. It was not the way it was supposed to feel outside. Vivian bared her teeth and inhaled with her mouth, as the scratchy air circled down her throat like glass dust into her lungs. The entire place felt wrong, even infective. To stand there, in a place of wrongness and wasted effort, with noises and no conversation, it felt like an illness.

Vivian scraped the side of her knife against her reflective vest, to clear off the tape-residue. The hiss of the plastic on the vest against the stainless steel blade was so high in pitch that it almost made Vivian nauseous. She bent her arm, lifted her knife over her shoulder, and cast it forward into the heap of cardboard boxes. She expected an incisive slashing sound in the air, and for the knife to defiantly stick out from the box that it hit by its point. Instead, the knife made a whiffling sound when she flung it, and the tip of the blade glanced off the cardboard and landed in the sand and grit on the ground, leaving a shallow but vicious-looking tear on the cardboard. The edges of the paper wrinkled and split, and the serrations at the bottom of the knife carried on them some straggling bits of cardboard, trophies of its brief excursion in the air.

Vivian sighed, just to hear her own voice. She sounded too low for her liking, as though she was whispering, even though there was no one around. There was no reason for her voice to be so bothersome. It was just a harmony determined by muscles tuned in tension, buried somewhere in her neck. Depending on whether she was inside or outside, alone or among strangers, her voice could slink in and out of her own recognition, for so great was its ability to disguise; so closely did her voice cling to all her vital organs that it seemed to be a physical part of her, an organ of social mimicry. For being alone with her thoughts, she still found it hard to think, if only because she didn't know the correct way to be alone.

Now that she was alone, Vivian's voice sounded like smooth, sanded plywood, soft and knotted and comfortably blunt. Yesterday it sounded like a metal cable; grindy, almost polyphonic. Neither really sounded the way she expected.

Vivian shuffled some boxes to the side with her feet, and knelt down to pick up her pocketknife from the ground. The black handle and blade were dusted with blue and brown sand, crumbs of refuse and scraps of paper. Vivian wiped both sides of the blade on her reflective vest, out of spite for the bright burdensome garb. She hoped it might slash straight through the vest, leave an irrevocable mark of her own free will on it, but that would really be more trouble than the moment of destructive freedom would be worth.

Kneeling among the dirt and detritus, Vivian looked directly ahead of her. Wedged between the cubic interlock of a couple boxes was an upside-down white canvas, stretched over a wooden rectangle. It was only the edges of the canvas that were white, marred with jagged bits of paint, of murky blues and greasy yellows. Vivian knelt down on the ground more comfortably, shifting her weight onto her down-laid foot instead of her bent knee, and without looking, she refolded her knife back up and let it drop into her jacket-pocket. She contemplated the upside-down painting. For a moment, the entire canvas was interesting to her than whatever would have been on the painted side, because finding a painting in the trash was not the kind of thing that happened to Vivian.

The canvas sat in the center of her eye, lensing her attention around it almost as though moving closer to her. She felt a calmness upon her like a warm hood around the back of her head. It was a welcome feeling to desire something.

Vivian reached toward the canvas, and gripping both sides of it, Vivian extracted the great flat rectangle from the crag of cardboard. She heard some boxes fall over each other in the pile. The canvas was stapled squarely around a wooden backing frame, and she thought about pilfering some screw-hooks and spare wire from the supply closet to let the painting hang in her apartment. She imagined the painting's four corners, like insect-eyes, looking at her apartment-mates for her, and Vivian might

somehow feel their gazes looking back through it. Her hands turned the painting over with an aching anticipation.

The primary subject of the painting was a naked woman, turned around from the viewer, seated down with legs, thin and tapered, pushed forth in front of her. One knee was raised, making a chevron of dusty beige skin, and the other leg was hidden behind it, but the foot lay sideways on the ground, unintending to stand. Every part of the figure's body betrayed an absence of intention. The figure's back curved forward with a smooth and penitent hunch, as though deep in consideration. Her arms bent in front of her, unraised, almost contently, although the gestures of her hands were not visible. They were blocked by the figure's nude legs and midsection. Her shoulders sloped low with weightlessness, and the head was angled away, its affect hidden but assuredly there. Visible were a single eye, closed into a single line shaded above and below, and an ear, pinkish and wrapped around with stray mud-brown hair. Two stacked protrusions in the face, shaded into a curve, suggested the corner of a pair of lips and the plumpness of a cheek. The figure was seated on the ground, but in the way that her spine jutted forward and in the clean uniformity of her bare skin, she seemed to have a weight evenly distributed beneath her, in multipedal balance upon her bent knees.

The ground or floor that the figure was stationed on was a decayed-looking shade of blue, sunken into an honorable black where the figure's shadow gathered beneath her. On one side of her, the way the figure was facing, the wall stood in unmarked brown, the same shade as her hair, and the two forms did not touch. For the other side of the figure's head, she leaned against alternating stripes of pink and azure, occasionally intercepted by lines of white. The forms were vaster and flatter than the shaded and curvilinear surfaces that made up the figure. And in the bottom left corner, maintaining a distant and untouching symmetry, a signature in sidewinding cursive trailed off the canvas. The letters leaned with the same arcing angle as the subject-figure's unweighted spine. They all formed into one another so completely that when Vivian read the signature, it felt as though she was rewriting it herself.

A.B Etmoll, it read.

The colors of the background darkened deeply in reverence around the figure, around her face and abdomen and arms, that she seemed almost above the canvas, beyond its own confinement and behind it too, that Vivian entertained the notion that she could tilt the canvas away from herself and see the rest of the figure on the blank reverse side.

Vivian leaned the bottommost side of the painting on her thigh, and freed her right hand. She shook it out to her side, loosening her glove, and brought it back to her mouth where she fully removed it from her hand with her teeth. Curious about what a painting felt like to touch, Vivian placed her thumb against the figure's ear, and let her fingertips slide over the figure's textured neck and onto the shoulder-blade. The paint was rough, like a three-foot-tall scab. Vivian could feel, in the dips and the raised ridges, where the paint had been spread on more substantially; the edges of the body, the contours where the form shadowed over itself, and the places where the most colors clashed. But on the figure's clean shoulder-blade, tender and weightless, the paint was so thin that it seemed almost to have been a dye onto each thread that made up the canvas. It was innate, and intimate. The figure, whoever she must have been referenced from, must have had an unusually relaxed and slackened back, that Vivian had just thoughtlessly touched. When the canvas dipped inward from its stapled wooden backing, it felt as tense as nervous skin, contacted by that of a stranger, and Vivian recoiled at the thought.

Vivian realized, in an instant of unfocused semi-thought, that she was not supposed to touch paintings. She moved her legs and ran her thumb down her reflective vest, either to clean off any stolen paint-flecks or to remind herself that she was still at work and still had boxes best cleared away before dark.

“What am I going to do with you?” Vivian asked. Only by asking it did the question fully come to mind, forming itself from the outside in like molten metal filling a mold. The painting, for all her time spent looking at it, was not hers. It belonged to A.B Etmoll, who must have put an excruciating effort into it. Maybe it belonged to someone else, and whoever it was, they deigned to throw it out with the cardboard recycling, for some reason. So really it belonged to no one, and if Vivian took it, she would be depriving no one of any rightful claim. Still, someone had thrown out the painting, and Vivian let the

thought pasture in her mind as to why. For as much as she stared at the painting, it was not what Vivian considered beautiful.

It commanded her senses in the same way that a sudden scream would. It was the existence of the painting that bound Vivian's attention. Like how the girl seemed beyond the background, the painting seemed to be made more impressive by the fact that Vivian had found it before it would have been hauled away to a recycling plant. That was worth more than the actual content of the painting, and that was reason enough worth exploring. The girl could have been a portrait of anyone; most of her face was not even visible. But the original owner of the painting, the arbitrator of what made it beautiful, was someone worth searching for.

“What've you got there?”

An unfamiliar voice flowed into the back-alley, soft yet forceful like water swallowed too quickly. Vivian caught her breath. She drew the painting closer to herself, and when her tongue fell to its regular position of fearful silence, it met the nylon thatching of her glove, still held in her own mouth from earlier. She opened her teeth to let the glove fall, and caught it in her waiting hand as the other embraced the painting, keeping its frontside hidden.

The speaker was a man, on the farther side of middle-age. His two long arms framed his body, and his right arm was pressed so firmly into the pockets of his coat that he looked like he was using them to hold himself up from the ground. Over his lanky form sat a coat of bulky swede, and on his bald head was a loose-fitting bucket-hat. His eyes were wide, even as the skin around them looked sunken. His left hand, Vivian could see, held a lit cigarette between two fingers, turning it side-to-side with a sense of shameful idleness. Vivian recognized this sort of person as one who didn't want to be seen smoking, but who couldn't refuse the opportunity for company when doing so. In a way, Vivian and the stranger were in similar predicaments.

“What is that?” the man asked, with a sticky-sounding earnestness trickling around his voice and soldering his words together. He asked another question, but Vivian couldn't hear it. She heard his voice, etched with syllables and tones, and saw his face shape the sound, but the words themselves were below

Vivian's hearing. This always happened, before too long, in every conversation for as long as Vivian could remember.

Vivian caressed the wooden back of the canvas, deciding how to answer by spelling out words with her fingertips in a manual language that even she couldn't understand. Even if she didn't know this old man, she recognized what sort of person he was. But Vivian had already disfigured the conversation. The old man had said something, that Vivian had elected not to hear. Even standing at frightful attention with this interrupting stranger, she blamed herself for not focusing enough, or not having listened closely, or some combination of the two, because no matter what Vivian said next, whatever the old man had said could not be addressed. There was nothing worth saying anymore, but to say nothing would be a harder embarrassment. Explaining the painting— or even worse, showing it to this stranger— was unacceptable.

She tried thinking about the painting, about her luck for having found it, but she could not summon the image of the painting to her mind. Its details came to her in an overwhelming deluge, muddling color and shape, corroding her memory. She remembered none of the details she had spent her time chasing. With the conversation shambling, and her own shame compounding on itself, Vivian let the painting drop to the ground in front of her feet, where the impact made the canvas ripple for a moment. Vivian took a step backward so the painting would fall face-down toward her.

"It's nothing," Vivian answered apologetically, entirely aware of every vibratory rattle that her voice sent through her skull. "Just some garbage."

The old man's mouth widened with disappointment. Looking away from Vivian, he placed the cigarette back between his lips and inhaled. Vivian looked over to see what the man was looking at. His head was oriented toward the gap between the other apartments, somewhere about the treetops of the park. The man was not looking at anything, Vivian understood. He was avoiding being looked in the eye. With his shoulders slightly raised, the man turned further away.

Vivian wanted to apologize, but it wouldn't be worth the words. She had already misheard whatever he would have said, and Vivian owed herself the continued silence. Mishearing was not like forgetting or misunderstanding. Things forgotten could be remembered, with enough time and associative

thinking, and misunderstanding allowed for the formation of an actual thought. When Vivian misheard something, it was as though those words were not even spoken. They would say something, and it would go unheard, sometimes even if they repeated it over and over again. Vivian blamed herself for dragging others by the tongue into her own pointless paradoxes.

Vivian slowly lifted the painting back up, gazing again at the bare-skinned girl. Even in her shame, Vivian felt calm. The girl in the painting seemed invulnerable. Vivian felt right in not being seen by the painted girl, as though she could comprehend Vivian's shame from inside the canvas.

A stack of wooden pallets leaned against the recycling dumpster, with chipping paint and protruding nails keeping the entire stack together. Stepping over the sand and the cardboard, Vivian leaned the canvas underneath the pallets, in their triangular shadow. There was more to be done before she could leave later tonight, and she would find the painting's owner once she got home. She picked up another box, turned it over, pulled open her knife and broke the box down with nervous haste. The shadow of Maro Park Apartments was growing darker, and the sun was sinking out beyond the highway.

Vivian had spent her last few hours tying off garbage bags, vacuum-cleaning the carpets in the apartment lobby, sweeping and mopping hallways floor by floor. There was an unmoving silence inside of Maro Park. The silence was almost a physical presence, and it permeated the other senses. Vivian understood, somehow, that silence smelled like the metal on the apartment staircase banister that had been greased by the skin of a hundred hands, that it looked like the hazy shadows left behind under the yellow fluorescent lights in the hallway, that the silence offset her balance and made her feel hot down to her bones.

The hallways of the building had only a few tenants wandering around. When they walked, they gave Vivian a wide berth as she drove her mop-bucket, even though they usually turned their eyes down to their own feet when they saw her. There was one exception, a man in his twenties or so, in a clean and pressed button-shirt, who paid particular attention to Vivian as she cleaned the hallway, and that had met

her gaze with several toothy grins and self-assured chuckles. As she mopped, Vivian kept returning her eyes to the young man, keeping an expression of total disregard on her face, starving herself of any legible emotion at all, but keeping her own eyes firmly on that of this snickering boy, as Vivian brought her hand slowly closer to the pocket where her knife was resting. After a few minutes, the well-pressed shirt and the person therein went back inside one of the apartments, and Vivian left the floor only partially mopped for the night.

The cleaning closet was a square room, covered in roughened surfaces and kept cool by the drafts and the running water, like a part of the outside transplanted into the building. The damp air in the closet felt more like misty fog than waterborne rot. It moistened Vivian's dry eyes and mouth. She breathed it deeply, as she poured out her mop bucket of lukewarm black water, feeding it back into the cleaning closet's miniature ecosystem. Vivian hung up her mop on a metal hook on the wall, and when she dropped her gloves into the bucket she had taken them from at the start of her shift, one glove flopped over the lip of the bucket and the other fell gracelessly onto the tile floor.

Vivian walked the basement hallway of Maro Park Apartments, past the sand-smelling cinderblocks and pipes snaking along the ceilings. The basement was brighter than the foyers and halls upstairs, from the evenness of the lights and the pallor of every shale-colored surface; it helped keep Vivian awake despite the late hour. All along the walls and the staircases, Vivian thought about how the dizzying brass and blackwood stylings of the apartment complex above were supported from below by narrow corridors of dust and plaster.

She walked the opposite direction in the foyer tonight, toward the back-door where the dumpsters were, instead of the front. Vivian thought about the painting again, what she would be taking home with her. She thought about the squareness of the edges, the way they seemed to fit evenly between her hands, how it seemed fit exactly to be held rather than hung up on any wall; especially more than being left in the garbage. Vivian could almost feel the texture of the paint on her fingers, dried with exhaustion as they were, as though it were grafted onto her skin. She tried to remember the subject of the painting, the girl seated in disregard, but the image was unclear in her mind. To remember it the way Vivian wanted would

need recreating every shade-value, every angle that made up the girl, down to the peaks and trough of every brushstroke on her, everything that identified the painting as the singular, irreplicable object that Vivian had found herself; for this kind of thing didn't happen to people like Vivian. To think about the painting felt like an insult to it.

Vivian pressed open the back door of the apartment building, into a wall of raindrops, dense and sloppy, whipping every surface outside with the crack of each watery coronet. The wind held the door open, pulling out more of Vivian's horror as she scanned the surroundings for the recycling dumpster. Its red color, and the colors of the stack of pallets that leaned against it, were darkened and intensified with rainwater. Vivian brought her arms and shoulders closer together, and through the twisting pains in her knees and ankles, she charged out into the rain, bearing toward the pallets where she hid the painting.

Vaulting over puddles and tensing her entire body, Vivian sprinted toward the dumpster. The sand under her feet had congealed into loose mud, neither slippery nor sturdy but infusing each of Vivian's footsteps with a squelching noise and an unclear sense of delay. From above, raindrops made Vivian's hair fall in front of her eyes, and from below, water leapt onto her feet. On the rare rainy day in Newlocke, it seemed as though the entire world slowed down to watch the spectacle.

The cardboard clambering over the top of the dumpster was beaten in by the rain. The flat surfaces sank and darkened into a pitiful matting of drenched paper, with only its vast quantity stopping it from dissolving completely into an oozing pulp. Although she couldn't see them, Vivian heard the roar of passing cars by the park, the sounds of their tires flourished by the hissing and splashing of puddles.

Vivian reached below the wooden pallets, with the smell of their sawdust filling her nose, until her fingers touched canvas; still impossibly dry. The pallets had protected it dutifully. She let out a sigh that left her lungs feeling cold, as she retrieved the painting and lifted it under her arm. As she started around the block in the direction of the bus stop, Vivian peered downward at the painting. When she could once again see the relaxed, inviolate figure of the girl, seated against the unlined colors, Vivian understood why she could not remember the painting earlier. The girl, for the instant that Vivian looked at her, occupied a space of fearfulness in Vivian's mind. Maybe it was the girl's nakedness, and the way that

A.B Etmoll sounded like a man's way of abbreviating his name; or maybe it was the merciless rain, bombarding the surface of the canvas for the single moment that Vivian looked at it, but the painting beckoned fear from Vivian.

Vivian wanted to look away, but it seemed almost dishonorable to do so. The girl in the painting did not mind being seen, and she didn't feel the rain.

When she stood up to disembark the bus, Vivian was surrounded on all sides by possible onlookers. Behind her, the other passengers, ahead of her, the driver, and on each side, a row of wide and brightened windows, the streets visible through them. Vivian held the painting close to her side with her jacket folded over the top of it, and moved toward the door at the front of the bus. She felt hollow as she walked, as though all of her innards had been extracted from her by the rapacious eyes of everyone around. Nobody else was carrying a painting under their arm, there was no correct technique for Vivian to follow. She understood that paintings weren't meant to be carried around, much less were they meant to be hidden from view. Vivian was breaking every rule of the painting's existence. In trying to hide it, she feared that she might only be making herself more conspicuous. But when she laid both feet on the sidewalk in eastern Newlocke, when the bus exhaled behind her and crawled away to the stench of rubber and steel-dust, Vivian was alone on the street with the painting.

Her apartment was only one corner's-turn away from the bus stop, and the night was humid and warm, like a gaping mouth, sealed open and still breathing. Nonetheless, Vivian walked quickly and wanted to get back inside.

Her apartment building was not dissimilar from the one at Maro Park, especially at night. But at Maro Park, the dim lights were an architectural choice, and the tremor in the elevator was less noticeable than here. It had been a subtle rocking in the Maro Park elevator, but Vivian was sure she could notice it there, just as she could notice the way the elevator at her own apartment building quake as it reached the

second floor. As it did, Vivian felt her arm surge downward to her side, to hold more tightly onto the painting from its back.

At her apartment door, Vivian fumbled the painting under her arms, keeping its long sides balanced. Vivian pulled out her keys with an inexact movement of her arm, that almost knocked her knife out of her pocket with them.

Behind the door, Vivian's two roommates reclined on the couch, folded and creased inside each other's arms, with the glow from their movie splashing over their faces. Their eyes were bright when they turned to notice Vivian. Straggling smoke from the ashtray next to them left the slightest of shadows on their faces.

"Hi Conrad, Gila," Vivian greeted the two. Gila's eyes were barely open, and her face was warped against the side of Conrad's shoulder. One corner of her mouth had hung open, and Gila closed it when she realized that Vivian had come inside. Gila was a tall, slender woman, and when she lay on the couch against her lover, she seemed almost compacted around him like an affectionate spider. Conrad was similarly tall, with a heavy-set figure and a sense of sturdiness and ease behind every movement that he took. The exception to Conrad's carefulness was his black hair, regal in its oily reflectiveness, with its length fell over his own shoulders and partially spilling onto Gila's forehead.

Conrad said something. His husky voice was crawled upon and infested with the sound of the television, and his syllables bled together. Vivian couldn't hear what he said. She could taste her own guilt on her breath. Even though Conrad had spoken slowly, Vivian scorned herself for not paying enough attention.

"Sorry, what?" Vivian asked.

"I said, did you find that at work?" Conrad asked. Vivian could hear how his voice was made more relaxed for getting to repeat himself, as though the words had left a track in his mouth the first time that the second iteration now flowed through easily.

"Yeah," Vivian replied. She started moving toward her bedroom, holding herself back from leaving her wallet, keys, and knife on the side-table. Gila and Conrad didn't like clutter.

“Someone was just throwing it out?” Gila interjected, shifting her position on the couch and pushing off from the side of Conrad’s arm.

“In the cardboard recycling,” Vivian said. With delicate imperceptibility, Vivian stroked the wood backing of the painting with her finger. She still held its front-side against her, leaving the empty back of the canvas to face her two room-mates.

“Classy,” Gila said. She paused, then spoke some more. Her words were soldered inseparably to the noises of the TV and the muffled howling of the neighbors. Whatever Gila had said, Vivian could not hear, but she saw Gila point at the painting with a long and decisive gesture.

Vivian touched the back of the canvas once more. It was almost flat, with not a thread out of place on its contour. She could feel the pushback on the material in the places where the paint was thickest on the front. She brought the painting closer.

“Sorry,” Vivian answered, “what was that?”

“Are you going to hang it up,” Gila asked again, still pointing again at the painting. “Because it doesn’t have the wire, or cable, or whatever that is that paintings are supposed to have.”

Vivian loosened her grip a small amount, letting air pass between her and the painted side again. Even though she still felt astronomically out-of-place with the painting, at least Gila had been pointing to the back of the canvas, and still could not see the front.

“Oh,” Vivian said, noticing the absence of any hanging-wire with a light pat on the canvas. “No, I’m going to find the owner.”

Gila’s eyes widened.

“It’s probably the artist, if there’s no cable or anything. Whoever they are really didn’t want it.”

The notion scattered and diffused around Vivian, finally gathering onto her like an ensnaring hand around her face. She had not given much thought yet to how she would find the owner, but Gila had focused Vivian’s search with a single monotonous observation. The name of one A.B Etmoll still marked off the bottom-right corner of the artwork. That would be somewhere to start.

“Thank you,” Vivian said. She started toward her bedroom, canvas still justling next to her. Behind her, she heard the delicate voice of Conrad.

“What’s it a painting of?” he asked. Vivian kept walking toward her room, ensuring not to speed up her footsteps and make her flight more obvious. She ducked into her bedroom, closed the door with a swift battering, and lost the pursuant question out in the apartment hallway. In the darkness of her room, Vivian flicked on the light with her elbow. If she had done rightly, Conrad and Gila would think that Vivian simply didn’t hear the question at all.

Her bedroom was a cozy mess. The scattered trappings and placeless items kept the warm, dry air in place. When she had people in her room, they never seemed to mind much anyway. It was Vivian’s space, her domain, and her own private disarray was a state of peace. There was no need to agonize over where anything went, over any order or arrangement. Things were comfortable wherever they lay. Vivian placed the painting down gently into the corner, facing the wall. As Vivian straightened the canvas out, she noticed an imperfection on the wood. The bottommost side, the one that had sat on the ground during the rain, had been stained with a thin and lumpy field of dark blue discoloration. Closer to the center of this discoloration was another blot of dark green, no bigger than a fingerprint but still unmistakable on the white canvas back. While the rain had not reached the painting from above, the time spent soaked from below had left a stain of decay, like an eye, held unbearably open forever.

Vivian knelt down and tried scraping the rot off with her fingernail. The softened wood-slag started to peel, and its cold moistness stuck to Vivian’s hand. She shook the wet detritus off of herself. She felt a twitch in her lungs, like a fearful mistake of her very being, suddenly caught and set right. Whoever this painting belonged to, wherever this A.B Etmoll was, the painting itself was hurting when in Vivian’s company. But for now, it was a part of the mass of her room, albeit temporarily. Vivian felt dissatisfied; envious, although she could not figure out what toward.

Vivian rose up to her knees, and reached up to her desk for a box of cigarettes and a lighter. She took out one cigarette, tapped it against the box and slipped it between her heavy-feeling lips, lit it and

inhaled. The hot smoke filled her insides, its sharpness sanding away the fragments of half-formed thoughts. She leaned forward again and turned the canvas around, facing the painting again.

In the long moments between drags, Vivian tried to figure out, with a backtracking sense of logic, why someone would have thrown the painting out. The sheer stillness of the girl in the painting, leaning on some stripes and turned away from the real world, seemed inexorably present; there was no past for the girl, and no future. She would always have been leaning, and she would never get up. She was immune to any change, or any regret. The real, unpainted world, with all the strictness of cause and effect and linear time, didn't interest her. The girl in the painting preferred that which didn't exist to that which did. It had done nothing to make its way into Vivian's possession, and Vivian had done nothing to bring it to her. The two had crossed each other's paths on their disparate ways through the currents of Newlocke. This was not something that happened to people like Vivian. She was sure of what kind of person she was not. Ideally, she was no kind of person at all. Imperceptible, and thus invulnerable.

Holding her cigarette between her knuckles, Vivian leaned closer to the canvas. The girl there had her eye painted shut permanently. Despite the suggestion of the shapes and colors, there was no frontside to the girl, no complete face. Even within her flat world of brushstroke atoms, the girl was unaware. More than paint, more than color, more than image, the girl was an emptiness—hypoesthesia.

Vivian could look at the painting forever, until her eyes gave out and her mind departed. Still, the girl would not move. Vivian could ask questions to the girl, and the information would cease to exist.

"What's your name?" Vivian asked the painting. Her voice was clear and airy when she was alone, it sounded almost recognizable. "Where did you come from? Can I see your face?"

There were no possible answers. The painting was oblivious to any who laid eyes on it. Vivian envied the painting's imperviousness to understanding.

Leaning forth again, Vivian held the lit end of her cigarette toward the painting, moving forward inch by inch. The amber glow narrowed and intensified in on the painting the closer that the burning end approached. Of course, the girl did not move. Vivian retracted the cigarette and planted it back between

her lips, extending a finger instead and running it down the figure's back, down onto her waist, then tracing along the edge of her arm, then onward to her knee. She did not move the slightest amount.

Vivian didn't recall having moved onto her bed to fall asleep, but that was where she woke up. All the time spent looking at the painting, thinking of herself in the place of that girl, behind a sheet of oblivion from everyone else, seemed to have taken up the whole night. Even this morning, when the dusty, sunlight fell through Vivian's window, it seemed to cling toward the painting particularly. It exposed to Vivian the painting's profound state of ordinariness. It was not beautiful, not by Vivian's personal preference, but its plainness of artistry made it, and the girl it depicted, seem more approachable, almost amiable. This would be, if not for the girl's impenetrable unawareness.

Vivian turned over in her bed, letting her arm drop limply over the side and onto the floor. It was hard to tell how early it was with the sunlight coming through the window, but the buzzing of cars from outside had suggested to Vivian that it was late in the morning, and time to get something to eat. Vivian dragged herself up from her bed. With her eyes turned toward the painting, the artwork of a younger woman than her in a state of absolute and undisturbed rest, Vivian was made more aware of how much force it took just to stand upright on two legs. Her balance felt flimsy, making her feel like a machine with a broken part tumbling around inside of itself. Her eyes sagged into her face, and lent the familiar angles of her room a disorienting flatness.

Vivian had considered the possibility of getting a day-job to complement her night-job and supplement her income, but it was hard to find the volition. Conrad and Gila were to be moving out soon; Vivian had overheard them mentioning it through the wall one night. She figured that the pair would formally tell her sometime, but she didn't fault them for not knowing how to phrase the unfortunate news. Vivian knew that she would eventually be the sole rent-earner again. But jobs in Newlocke were scarce, and they had been for as long as Vivian remembered; day jobs especially. For the time being, one job on second-shift was enough.

Standing up now, Vivian extended one hand toward her bedroom wall. Her shoulders felt stiff and crushed inward on her spine; maybe she'd slept on them wrong, she thought. A stony silence filled the bedroom, insulated by the coat of quiet in the rest of the apartment. Gila and Conrad must have been out for the day. The loudest noise in the apartment was Vivian's breath and the cracking of her knee-joint. Even though she was alone, Vivian still felt as though she was being unnecessarily loud, like there was someone else there that she was disturbing.

Vivian lifted the painting by its top and leaned it against the center of her bedroom wall, closer to her bed. She had to displace some loose items on the floor with the side of her foot, and as she lowered the painting down onto the carpeted floor, she noticed that the decay on the frame had darkened in color. The rot was mosslike now. The heat in the room, and the humidity, made for a suffocating combination.

The painting stood elegantly against the wall, almost entirely flush with it. Vivian sat on her bed and pulled a cigarette from her nightstand. Her eyes brushed over the painting, end to end and corner to corner, putting a unified visual to the painted surface that had become familiar to her fingertips. The painting was once more in its natural habitat of motionlessness. It made no sound, produced no smell other than the faint stench of food-refuse that still lingered on it. The painting was purely visual and tactile in its existence. It couldn't speak, so Vivian was not at risk of mishearing anything. Vivian and the girl in the painting made quiet company together, between the real world and some stranger's imagination.

With her cellphone held unsteadily in front of her, Vivian turned the camera to capture the painting, but the miniature reproduction on her phone didn't seem correct. It failed to embody the physicality of the painting, the way its colors preyed on the light around it. The photo of the painting was too glossy, its surfaces were too fine, while the girl in the painting was rough with brushstrokes. Her flesh seemed to extend beyond the background, but not in this adulterated copy on Vivian's screen. Still, this

was the best photo of it she had gotten all morning, and her wrist had started to feel like it had been drilled through longwise, between her index finger and her elbow.

Tethered together with a cable, Vivian's phone and laptop both sat side-by-side in the available spots on her desk. She cycled through the photos she had taken. Each variation in angle or perspective seemed to make the painting shake and twitch on her screen, like it was trying to force its way out. Vivian flexed her index finger on the scrolling wheel on her mouse, curling and uncurling against the tender surface, flicking it forward and back in a satisfying equity of pressure. After a few moments, Vivian felt her eyes beginning to blur from the quick procession of photos.

She dragged the most recent one into the center of a blank document, and typed out the rest of the copy, distractedly and piecewise, rearranging and deleting words just for the momentary sense of progress and the desire to stall for time on the painting's behalf. Vivian deleted the image and replaced it, deleted and replaced it, all in succession, doing one just to do the other and to hear her mouse click.

Found Painting, the top read, in bolded lettering. Then below it, a photograph of the painting itself, in all its falsehood. *Signed "A.B Etmoll." Found outside Maro Park Apartments. Searching for Original Owner. Contact below for Further Information.* Vivian considered whether or not to include her phone number, but made her decision based on prior precedence; she'd seen a few lost pet posters around Newlocke, and it seemed acceptable for them to list their numbers. There was no precedent for returning a lost painting, and a nude nonetheless. Vivian had no desire to deal with calls about the painting from people who wanted it for that reason. Some retch might pretend that they're A.B Etmoll, thank her graciously for finding their lost work, and get to walk away with a naked portrait of an anonymous girl. The idea was revolting.

Leaning her head back over the back of her office chair, its plastic armrests squealing with stress, Vivian glanced at the painting. The girl in the painting itself was facing the nothingness somewhere behind her. She was at home among nothingness. She spoke the language of nothingness. Her eyes were the color of nothing, as were her fingernails and areolae, all of which were unseen from her posture in the

painting. The girl paid no mind to the idea of being seen. It was an entity all its own, the sole inhabitant of its own imaginary domain.

A search online found a couple people with the name “Etmoll,” but not one had the consecutive initials “A.B.” The artist had no public profile or record that Vivian could locate. There seemed to be no reference to that painting either. Vivian scrolled through page after page of results for nude paintings of every kind, and none resembled the one in her room. The painting was completely solitary, the only one of itself. For it to be seen was an act of defiance, an existence despite itself. And for Vivian to hold onto the painting in her home was Vivian’s own defiance, since this was not something that happened to people like Vivian.

She printed the document in multitude. The final stack of paper was thick and viscous, flopping from one side to the other with a slow but inevitable shift of its own weight. Conrad had a staple-gun somewhere in the closet out in the hallway, but Vivian felt hesitant to seek it out. Knowledge of the device felt like an intrusion on some sort of privacy; an overstep of thought. Dread packed into Vivian’s body like a deep chill beneath her skin. She dreaded taking the staple-gun, facing Conrad and needing to explain her rationale to him if she were to lose it. Vivian’s reasons felt flimsy, paired up against whatever Conrad might say in response. Vivian could imagine it perfectly. Conrad would be angered firstly by the use of his own belongings without his knowledge, any justifications would only be added humiliation. He might point out the aimlessness of hanging up paper posters, that they were more likely to get torn away or intentionally ignored than seen; or that they would be more likely to attract attention-starved lowlifes, driven by a visible phone-number and a photograph of a nude art piece; or how unlikely it was that Vivian had enough papers or staples to cover enough ground to capture the statistically elusive few who would have something useful to say. Perhaps even that the painting was not even from Maro Park, and that Vivian was looking in the wrong place, and therein was her foremost offense in stealing the staple-gun and wasting its munitions. Conrad and Gila kept all of their belongings in a strict order and placement. Their neatness was like a form of communication between the two of them, a unique and esoteric code, in whose conversation the two shared mutual understanding of one another. Vivian had known once what

that was like. She would be joining in on the couple's interpersonal code, desecrating it through decryption. There were plenty of reasons not to take the staple-gun, even temporarily, and Vivian could find few conversive reasons to do it. The desires of anyone else, their private thoughts and grudges, were a maze of dilemmas to Vivian. There were contradictions, misdirection, and every word had the possibility of going unheard.

Vivian exited her room and pulled the door shut behind her. She was unsure what she was doing, but for once, Vivian felt a true and unquenchable sense of purpose. She forgave herself one act of unreason in herself, for all the illimitable unreason that she saw in everyone else, every single day. One single contradiction of her own desire with her better judgement would be survivable. It was liberating to do so. The ravenous worrying still clouded around Vivian, but the agitation felt cushioning. It filled her stomach like a foodstuff when Vivian took each progressing step in the hallway, against the papery carpeting, toward the closet where the tools and cleaning implements rested.

The staple-gun, chrome and quickly spotted, stood right-angularly against the wall of the closet, with its flat top downturned to stand evenly on the shelf. Next to it was a faded box of nails, and on the shelf above it was an electric drill. Each instrument waited attentively for any future use to dare disrupt its structure. Pulling out the reflective staple-gun felt like what Vivian imagined grave-robbing must have been like. But the rounded grip of the staple-gun fit comfortably around Vivian's hand, and the printed copies of her posters seemed to balance its weight in her other hand. Vivian set out.

It was warm, and humidity swarmed the air like an omnipresent cloud of noiseless insects. Sunlight heated the city down to its concrete sidewalks, which had once been frozen by the bygone winter. Vivian wore her jacket anyway, so that she could have more covering for herself as she hung up the posters. Approaching the bus stop, Vivian slid the staple-gun into her pocket, as deep as it could fit, and put the sheets of paper against her stomach, zipping her jacket closed over them. No one else meandering outside would be carrying accoutrements like those. Vivian didn't need more needless and unproductive questions asked of her by the double-infinite number of eyes she would pass on the way back to Maro Park.

Vivian seldom had a chance to walk in Maro Park during the daylight, so she hadn't realized how many trees lined the whole area. Each sprout of green demarcated an even span of distance along each block, making the place feel measurably larger. When she usually saw the neighborhood in the evening, the lengthening shadows obscured every corner, and each had enough darkness around it to seem as towering and lonely as the entire buildings to which they were just a single component. But in daytime, the buildings were held further apart by the ever-elapsing sunshine, and traversing any distance seemed faster. Maybe it was Vivian's eyes being incompletely shut around the glare of the sunlight, her surroundings changed fast. The city mutated under sunlight.

The flat sidewalks by Maro Park were frictionless against the soles of Vivian's shoes. They propelled her forward, in the direction of the apartment building where the painting had first intersected her life. Utility poles, thick in diameter and evenly spaced on each block, with their cruciform supports high overhead, stabbed into the ground like swords, their hilts waiting to be grasped by the hands of the crawling clouds. As Vivian laid her palm against the splintery surface of the pole, she wondered how something so thin could tower so tall unsupported, and she imagined the incalculable damage that would be wrought if somehow, the pole's size got the better of it, and it fell down over the city, crushing and humiliating the heights of Maro Park, leveling itself with its enormous weight and forming a binding log-bridge between Maro Park and the eastside, uniting Newlocke under a fell path of destruction. What Vivian imagined felt equally frightening and beautiful. Those sorts of accidents never happened in places like this. This city had existed for two centuries, and the world had formed and progenerated around it, trapping it inside; Newlocke was the nacre pearl of the state of New Jersey.

Vivian placed one of her posters against the utility pole. The gentle spring wind still buffeted the paper, leaving visible scarring creases. Vivian drew the staple-gun from her pocket and pressed it against the top of the paper, carefully spreading her fingers out of the way of it. She squeezed the trigger with her palm, and the staple-gun gave off a booming metallic crack, echoing with the resetting of a spring inside

the tool and the splitting of wood under the punch of the staple. The noise hovered around Vivian, bringing her into more acute awareness of herself against the other people on the sidewalk. They wisped up and down the sidewalk, most of them not even looking toward Vivian as she hung her poster. But still there were a few who did, whose pupils moved toward Vivian, for her own eyes to meet in return. Vivian felt her insides shudder. Looking back toward the utility pole, she noticed with clarity that there were no other paper posters hung there. There were no stickers or homemade advertisements like there were in East Newlocke. The wooden poles here were barren; all but one, at least for now.

Vivian despised the way peoples' eyes moved as they walked, to keep their focus on her as they moved past. The false stillness in their irises, holding steady as the rest of their bodies moved, asking questions in their heads that Vivian could neither answer nor ignore. No matter how long they looked, they would always vanish, leaving Vivian to her task, their observations of her forever unalterable. They would never see her again, and even if they did, if they caught sight of her at work in her reflective vest behind the apartments, they would not speak to her, nor would she speak to them. Nobody spoke when outdoors. The noise was taken up only by the sounds of cars and wind; Vivian had enjoyed that, once.

She drove the end of the staple-gun against the bottom of her poster, and in a deft, continuous motion she pressed the trigger again and secured the sheet to the utility pole. She stared at the poster for a moment, as a jogger in expensive-looking nylon shirt sprinted by in the street, staring at her. The jogger quickly vanished behind her, and there was nothing Vivian could do or say. Unlikely to ever see that particular jogger again, Vivian could only remain still, standing there on her own, in the way the painting did. She could see the imperfect photograph of the painting she had used for the poster, at eye-level before her. She stood, existing under her own conditions. But the stillness hurt. It stifled her thoughts, kept her from thinking about the stream of strangers looking at her. She felt only her own slow breaths, circulating strange air.

Vivian deposited the staple-gun back into her coat pocket and straightened out the stack of remaining posters in her hands. The false image of the painting that plastered the center of each paper sheet sat before her, drawing her eyes in with its indifference. It was that indifference that felt so

unfamiliar to Vivian, that felt so painful. She walked toward the end of the block, where another pole, adjoined by cables, sat between the ground and the sky, shadowless in the midday sun.

Weeks had passed. There were a few responses, as Vivian had predicted, but none of them were genuine. Some bypassed the subject of the painting completely and were overwrought attempts to make a pass at her. She ignored those, blocked the numbers, and forgot the experience. The wasted time began to sink out of memory, and the weeks went by before Vivian could realize.

Even her bedroom seemed to overgrow around the painting. It became a regular part of her surroundings, and the fact that she was still merely the caretaker of the artwork and not the owner had ceased to matter to her. It was just there, as she was.

Vivian had not been sleeping properly. She had been waking up in the middle of the night, barely a few hours after getting off work, feeling sick to her head, congested in her nose and eyes and tasting rot on her tongue. She would awake again in the early afternoon, unrested but with her phantasmal symptoms vanished. She thought maybe it must have been her own room, always dusty and humid, like an indoor fen. The heat outside was rising, heralding the summer.

Tonight, Vivian had returned from work especially late. Her movements had become languid and tepid, as though her body was stiffening up. When she laid down to sleep, her eyes stuck to the painting across the room from her. In the darkness, Vivian was familiar with the gestures and vague forms of the painting, and remembered it more clearly than she could see it. She could discern the matching shapes of the painted girl and the dark background, and determine where one ended and the other began, all along the length of the girl's body. She could even read the signature of A.B Etmoll, just by remembering what each cursive letter looked like. Vivian stared at it, gazing until everything else in her room seemed to fall away. Vivian had not gotten used to the stillness and the indifference that had come so easily to the painting. She felt imprisoned, wrapped hermitically in her skin, as though the real Vivian was somewhere

deep inside of her, entombed under layers of shielding flesh, stamped with an inexpressive and unbreakable seal. It was not who Vivian was.

Morning set in, the sunlight sculpting around her room through the window. Somewhere outside, a police siren went loud and then quiet as it sped along the street outside. From the other side of Vivian's bedroom wall, Conrad and Gila were conversing with poorly maintained whispers, and despite their loudness, Vivian could not unmask a single word.

Vivian sat up in her bed, with her feet against the cold carpeting and her hands on her knees. She held a cigarette in her mouth. The accumulated smoke over the past few weeks had laid a thin yellow tint over the painting, concentrated mostly around the girl's shoulders and neck. Still, the painted girl was nonresponsive. Vivian could devise any question or enact any movement, and the girl would not respond. The girl had no concept of being watched.

Vivian stood up and walked over to the painting. She lifted it onto the chair in front of her desk, and set it down as though seating it there. The wooden stretcher bars on the back, as Vivian had learned they were called, were significantly thinner and darker in color, particularly near the bottom. Decay had laid in deeply, contracting the length of the wood and stressing the back of the canvas. The wood was shrinking down to a soft and corroded mass, fragile in Vivian's hand. The wood smelled fungal. The degradation had eaten around some of the staples, and over the past weeks they had leprously fallen out of the canvas and were lost in the carpet. Vivian had known that such a sight and stench would be behind the painting, but that did nothing to lessen the scourging feeling of her own failure. Perhaps, she thought, there was a reason that things like this didn't happen to people like her.

The sagging of the lower stretchers had warped the canvas and made it top-heavy, distorting the image on the front with it, in sinister subtlety. Vivian preened the front of the painting with the back of her hand. The paint was cracked in tiny implements, able to be touched but not seen, at least for now. Shame swirled inside of Vivian. Although the girl in the painting had no way of expressing it, Vivian's inattentiveness had left her scarred and sick.

Vivian left her room, stepping with caution, minimizing noise on the floor. She turned the handle of the tool-closet in the hallway, twisting it in her palm until it could twist no more, without a sound. Conrad and Gila's voices were still in a ghostlike intertwinement from their bedroom. Vivian scanned the darkened closet for the chrome metal of the staple-gun, but she could not remember where she had left it. She had retrieved it a few times in the past weeks, to replace posters that had disappeared or been windswept off from their postings, but the order of Conrad and Gila's organization had been shattered. Vivian searched along each shelf for her reflection in its chrome exterior.

The staple-gun was laid horizontally on top of both a box of vacuum-bags and a spool of string, somewhere off-center of the shelf below where it was supposed to be. Vivian pulled the staple-gun out, her fingers melding around the familiar metal curve of the grip, and pressed the closet door closed again, inching the handle closed with a turn of her free hand. She returned to her room, went down to her knees and brushed loose items out of the way on her floor until an approximate two-by-three-foot plot of open space expanded in front of her, into which she lowered the painting, frontside-down.

The back of the canvas was lined with wrinkles, pulling in on itself between the wooden stretchers. The rot had left impressions in the wood, deep fissures and black pores that ate away at the material. The canvas hung on the lower stretcher, where the staples once held it, like the sliced-open guts of the artwork left splayed on the floor. Vivian lifted the detached length of canvas and folded it back along the wooden stretcher, but the wood had shrunk with decay, and the crease in the fabric no longer lined up with the corner. Vivian stretched the canvas further inward, until it was as spread as evenly as it could be. As she pressed in on the wood, she heard a quiet, thin crackling noise emanate from it. Her own weight pressed down on the canvas was too much, and any more would split the painting open completely. Vivian, with her hands trembling and her every moveable muscle jerking unpredictably, put the canvas back down, and pressed the end of the staple-gun against it. She tried reasoning with herself that if the painting was destroyed, then nothing would greatly change from the way things were three weeks ago, but she knew better than that. The shame would stay with Vivian, for finding this painting and letting it disintegrate. Vivian pressed the staple-gun's trigger with the pommel of her hand, and the staple

shot down into the deteriorating wood with an authoritative crunch, passing directly through the fold of skin between Vivian's thumb and index finger.

The blood preceded the pain, which preceded the shock. Vivian's skin was not hardy enough to withstand the pressure of a staple-gun firing, so her skin was pinched against the back of the canvas, her open wound separated from spreading wood-rot by a single sheet of fabric. The blood, ferrous-smelling and sticky like red-black syrup, erupted around the pinched skin, flowing in a slow cascade and squeezed out of the open flesh. Instinctively, Vivian felt her arm pulling her hand away, but the staple held it securely into its own puddle of organic muck. The sickly red sloughing across Vivian's entire hand almost made her want to abandon it, to leave it affixed to the canvas rather than keep it on herself. But the irreconcilable pain was a fierce bond between Vivian and her hand, stronger even than the metal staple that passed unresisted through her skin and out the other side. Her fingers were shivering under the heat of the blood, but there was no decision behind those movements; Vivian's muscular control was met with an excruciating halt at the base of her wrist. Vivian's head felt tightened, as though the temples on her forehead had been tied together on the inside, forcing every point of her attention toward the delicate strand of skin, flattened and nailed through with a single prong of a staple, a quarter-inch wide. Vivian heard her own scream, but her throat had long since ceased any feeling. The fear that rampaged through her skull engulfed her entire body more intensely than she had felt before. It felt like bright, burning metal being lowered into her skin, yet at the same time, like the deepest and most inescapable cold, freezing her down to her every living cell. With her surviving hand, Vivian pushed the painting away from her, but it dragged her hand along with it, and left a broad streak of blood in the carpet. Vivian's terror focused her gaze onto the fact that she was ruining the painting further, that it still did not belong to her and she was tainting it by splattering its pristine face with her guilty blood.

She set both knees down on the wood stretcher, with enough of her weight on her feet as well so as not to damage the canvas anymore. With her free hand, she put the collar of her shirt into her mouth, and bit down on it, letting an aspirated grunt escape her. She grabbed hold of her wrist with her free hand, and with every remaining drop of effort, Vivian pushed down with her knees and pulled up with both

arms, bringing her skin out from through the metal, as the staple stayed inside the wood. Her body shook, and her vision went black for a fraction of a second. She felt herself moving, and felt the pull of the staple, forcing Vivian to stain the painted girl with her blood. For that girl, Vivian materialized even more effort in all of her uncaptured limbs, as she felt the skin tear further and further, the pain burrow deeper into her, until the entire length of her interfinger flesh was torn in two and free from the staple. Vivian fell on her back, bleeding away from the painting, to her thankfulness.

“Jesus Christ, Vivian, what happened?!”

Gila’s voice was strung by an uproarious shriek, and Vivian felt her footsteps pounding the floor toward her. Looking up at the ceiling, Vivian saw Gila, then Conrad, leaning over her, their eyes wide and bright with concern, their mouths moving too fast for Vivian to separate out their words. She tried to speak, but her body was too worn. The pain endured, and all Vivian could do was let it charge through her, unable to summon the willpower to speak about it to her two roommates, much less to scream about the pain, as it warranted. But she had gotten her blood away from the canvas, and that was enough for now.

Conrad held tightly onto Vivian’s wrist, as Gila poured a small stream of vodka over two cotton-balls. She handed them off to Conrad, and stepped over both Conrad and Vivian on the floor of the hallway.

“Hold it there. I’ll get the bandages,” she said. Her voice sounded sleepy, with words knocking one another down as they entered the air.

Conrad turned to face Vivian. He brought his hand up near her own, with her fingers hovering around her own bloody appendages.

“Is it okay if I—” he asked.

“Yeah,” Vivian answered, her shaky exhalation carrying most of the word.

Vivian felt Conrad’s hand holding her arm steadily, and then the barbed sting of the vodka against her open cut. Each point of pain seemed to split and divide into innumerable others, all in the

space of a few seconds. Vivian had saved enough of her energy to wince and close her eyes as the alcohol touched her wound.

The separation of the connecting skinfold between her index finger and thumb had left Vivian with a noticeably wider breadth of handspan. Her thumb now sat lower on the side of her hand, and could reach out more extensively, unbound from her index finger.

Yet for now, she was still unable to move any of them at all. Her mind went quiet, wandering beyond the bounds of the apartment, and out toward the street below. Another siren went by, rising and lowering in unstoppable progression. Somewhere, somebody laughed, just loudly enough to be heard by another stranger, as she sat on the floor of her second-story apartment with vodka seeping under her skin.

As Vivian rested, Conrad pressed all of Vivian's fingers together, pressuring the cut and keeping the two halves of separated skin side-by-side below the cotton-balls. She saw Conrad's heavy, oily hair dangle down in front of his eyes, while he turned his head to look between the tangles.

"I know it's not any of my business," Conrad said, "but what were you doing in there?"

Vivian worried about Conrad turning his head to the left, looking into the open door of her bedroom and seeing his own staple-gun, impermissibly used and left out. Vivian waited for the inevitable questions, the explanations that she would need to offer. But Conrad said nothing more, and he begged no justifications. As close as he came to peering into Vivian's open bedroom door, he never noticed his pilfered staple-gun there.

"Just fixing something," Vivian answered. "That painting that I found in the trash."

"I didn't realize you still had it. Wasn't it in the recycling, though?"

Vivian saw Conrad smile as he spoke. She could tell that Conrad was thankful for the chance to remember in accurate detail something about Vivian's own life, a kind gesture in the days after having given her the difficult news about he and Gila moving into a place of their own.

"It was," Vivian said.

“They must have really wanted to get rid of that painting, to throw it in with the recycling,” Conrad observed. Vivian said nothing. She had long since accepted that the painting had no discoverable past. All that mattered was its present, ever-morphing against that painted girl’s stoic tranquility.

Gila trudged back down the hallway, holding in front of her a rolled-up white bandage. She sat down beside the two, unrolling a length of bandage and ripping it off at the end with her teeth. She asked something of Conrad, whose discrete words Vivian could not hear.

“No,” Conrad answered her, “it’s been fine.”

“Pass that over here,” Gila said, pointing to Vivian’s arm. Lifting herself from against the wall with her shoulders, Vivian presented her hand, soaked by high-proof alcohol and puckered with dried blood, over to Gila, who bound it up, wrapping tightly around all of Vivian’s fingers and thumb. Once it had been covered, with only a minor blot of red among the folds of white gauze, Gila held out the open vodka bottle toward Vivian. She took the bottle in her free, right hand, and brought it to her lips.

The ceiling of her bedroom was a field of plaster, evenly lit in ochre by the setting sun outside the window. Vivian, on her back in her bed, had called her supervisor and requested the night off from work, detailing with exactitude how widely Vivian could flex her thumb in the wrong direction now. Her supervisor was accommodating, but Vivian’s attention was not wholly present, and when he told Vivian about something needing to be discussed tomorrow, Vivian didn’t hear what it was. That didn’t bother her as much as it would have any other time. The mishearing had never been her fault. A part of Vivian always knew it, ever since she was a child. For all the years since then, that thought had been running an endless circuit in her head, coming back to the forefront of her mind every once in a while, then going away again before too long; not realization, not memory, but just occasional, habitual willingness for Vivian to indulge in the truth. It was easier to fault herself, to punish herself for her troublesome hearing, than it was to tend to the constant world-facing apathy that would come about from any other conclusion.

Even that went away after a while. With the anger turned inside toward herself, Vivian would always have something to feel, no matter how much it hurt. There were better and more productive pains to feel, but this one was always nearby.

As she lay on her back, Vivian let her head fall to one side. She could smell her sweat in her sheets, and the receding sunlight had coated every surface in washed-out shadows that made Vivian tired just to look at. Across her room, placed upon her desk chair, was the painted girl, her shape and colors so thoroughly known to Vivian that seeing it again sent a ripple through her every memory, bearing down on Vivian's mind from all angles of the past. Vivian flinched. The painting had been mostly restored with the stapling, but this was a transient measure. The rot would spread, and the wooden stretchers would all degrade in time. The room would stay humid, and the heat would only keep rising once summertime came to pass. Eventually the stretchers would fall in, the painting would collapse, the girl would fold and disappear under the combined weight of all her substrative pigments. Then, it would be Vivian's task to forget her. Vivian looked down at her bandaged left hand and her free right one, both illuminated by the fiery horizon outside. It had been a long time since Vivian had seen sunset from indoors, as her job usually kept her out by then. It was a pleasant feeling, inasmuch as it felt like she was violating some nonsensical rule. Vivian sighed, a slow and lung-depleting sigh, just to breath in and taste all the dust and the moisture and see the painted girl more clearly again, to affirm where she was. Vivian was alone. She was not calm, nor was she agitated. Her pain had subsided, but she was not fully calm. Vivian was transcendently bored. The nude girl on the canvas was Vivian's only companion. Even after everything, Vivian did not find the painting beautiful. However, of the girl itself, Vivian felt a fleeting attraction. The girl looked like bored fun.

Everything Vivian had done, she had done for that girl, who was lacking in existence. And there she was now, bedside to Vivian, unveiled and ready. There were no words that needed to be spoken, no social signs or symbols to be decoded. The idea of it riled Vivian's imagination.

Keeping her contentedly tired eyes on the painted girl, Vivian ran her index- and middle-fingers on her right hand into her mouth, onto the warm underside of her tongue where her saliva pooled. She

lowered her hand down her torso and submerged her fingers below the waist of her pants and undergarments, finally into herself at the thought of the painted girl entering into an impossible existence.

Vivian imagined the girl kneeling overtop of her, holding down on Vivian with her slender arms, Vivian twitching her own legs against the spread of hers. Vivian envisioned how it would feel to raise her hand along the girl's flanks, from her waists up under her arms, then to her breasts, caged around by the fingers on Vivian's right hand. It was invigorating for her, but it was not enough. Vivian continued faster, stimulating herself with more force. Vivian felt her desire towering over herself, only growing in unstoppable reach toward the painted girl, on the other side of the real.

There were no dilemmas with this painted girl, no misdirections of what she wanted, if she wanted anything at all but to exist, as fallow ground waiting for Vivian's own faraway pleasure-seeking. She was bare; even from a distance the contours of her naked body were obvious and clear. Maybe that was exactly what had been wrong about all of Vivian's past lovers, that they were too close, or too loud, or too absorbent of Vivian, like sponges saturated with acid. Vivian desired that silence, that total, indomitable stillness, unable to perceive nor be perceived, but just to be. Vivian shut one eye, and kept the other open, its lids aflutter, still staring up and down every rise and indent on that painted girl. Every part of her body was covetously exquisite; she was perfect precisely because she was not real. She could never possibly be touched, and Vivian desired her all the more for that. Her desire spun and knotted and spiraled inside of herself, the more her fingers sank, the closer she was to the painted girl without ever meeting. Vivian's forearm felt overheated from within, but she continued anyway. The pain only fed her own satisfaction.

She neared climax. There was a great pushing forth within her entire body, a gripping of every involuntary reflex within her. She saw the painting in an absolute sense, as nothing more than what it was; colors on canvas, representation of what was real to someone else, another individual's imagination and not Vivian's own. The painted girl dispersed into shapes and shades and tricks of perspective; a canvas, three feet by two feet. Vivian came. She felt repulsed with herself.

Where her fingers were not damp, they were already starting to crust in the heat. She felt no enduring satisfaction afterward, just confusion at whatever had once aroused her, and at herself for imposing such qualities onto something so insubstantial. She had not even the desire to remain in bed to rest.

Breathing heavily, Vivian swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up without use of either of her arms. She had one last spur of anger in her, and it was enough to guide her toward her desk where she kept her knife. She lifted it, the cold metal auspiciously weighty in her well-exerted fingers, and she flicked the blade open. The steel was a deeper black than that which tinged the approaching night outside her window, but still it sparkled with acute sharpness. Vivian turned the knife in her hand, and stepped to the side until she faced the painted girl. She bent her elbow upward, lifted the knife over her shoulder, and cast it forward, flinging it toward the painted girl. The knife slashed through the air, rotating and flying true.

It struck the painting with the bottom of its handle, rather than its blade. The knife bounced off the stretched canvas with a hushed bellow, and clattered to the floor, where it spun and slid until it slowed and stopped right in front of Vivian's feet on the carpet.

Another clattering came from Vivian; the sound of laughter breaking through her clenched teeth. She laughed with a wide, mirthful smile, pulling the air back and forth in her mouth like a bowsaw clearing through a tree-trunk. She left the knife on the floor and returned to her bed, laughing all the while as the night set in around her.

Vivian awoke to a text message from a number she did not recognize. It had been another few days since this had last happened, but even after all that time, Vivian had no doubt it was something about that painting, but this string of messages was far unlike those. In her bed, Vivian read them in descending order, each another stroke of fear that shook her free of any exhaustion.

-Hello. I'm Lori Etmoll. You have my painting. I've seen your posters. Do I have the right number? I would like my painting back. It's my original work and my property, and it was never meant for anyone to see. I am not sure how you got hold of my work, but I appreciate your assistance in helping me get it back.

Below the message was a phone photograph of one of the posters on a wooden utility pole, bright in daylight, torn by breeze.

Vivian had only one hand to use her phone with, and her hand was unsteady and uncertain of how to respond. Some spark of success had fallen onto her about the painting. Yet still, it was inconclusive. Vivian had seen too many false inquiries about the artwork, back when she still received messages about them, and this message had its own discrepancy. Yet it was the boldness of that same discrepancy that attested to its truthfulness. There was no fawning or flattery in those messages, no wide turns of politeness. There was still so much more that Vivian wanted to know, promised between the unclarities in this Lori's messages. Still, Vivian couldn't bring herself to take it for truth yet. She typed her message with only her right hand, with her phone leaning against the gauze around her left.

-I still have the painting. The painting is signed "AB Etmoll" Could you explain this, if you're the painter? I've gotten a lot of bad-faith messages about this painting and I need to be sure.

Vivian sat up in her bed and leaned against the plaster of the wall to cool off. Seeing her words in her own response made her filter through every grammatical error, every possible grounds for mistake or overshoot, and there seemed to be more on each reading pass through. Vivian panted heavily. She missed that lively state of panic, the mastery with which she could stretch time to its perceptual limit. In a fittingly short amount of time, Vivian had received a reply.

-It's not "A.B Etmoll." It's "4/8," the date that I completed it. Please, I assure you, it's my painting.

Sensation depleted from Vivian's hands and legs, but whether it was from fright or from excitement Vivian could not distinguish. After nearly a month of dead-ends and directionless interactions, the artist had found her. Vivian still remained unwilling to accept it, despite every mark of verity. Lori

Etmoll was too insistent about the painting, and Vivian had seen that sort of fixation before, enchanted under the idea of the painting. It reminded Vivian of herself.

She typed out a reply.

-I understand.

After a minute of staring at her screen, retracing each letter with her tired eyes, clawing every morsel of meaning and connotation from her words and Lori's, Vivian's phone vibrated with a response from the artist.

-So when would I be able to come pick my painting up?

Vivian felt every possible answer, every lie and omission, every available route away from the conversation all bottleneck into the forefront of her mind. She typed them all in succession, composing and deleting each one, sending none of them.

-No.

-Someone's already claimed the painting, I'm sorry.

-The painting doesn't actually exist, sorry.

Each one was a different breed of conversational difficulty, each their own pit of interaction that Vivian would need the fortitude to throw herself down into. They were each too passionate. Vivian looked past her cellphone and onto the painting, still standing across from her, without a single expression of care or regard. Vivian closed and opened her fist, just to feel exactly where her fingers were, since the nervousness had still rendered them numb. Drawing upon that painting's indifference, Vivian sent her response.

-You can come pick up the painting today, if possible.

The message was sent and could not be retracted. Relinquishing the painting itself was the cost of finding out why it existed, and why it was ever there below the cardboard recycling for Vivian to find. Vivian wanted to feel accomplished about it. She knew what it felt like to look forward to that which she had desired for the past month, and she could innumerate in her mind how it would feel to fulfill such a desire, but she could not feel it. As skillful as Vivian was by now at confining her emotions into

inexpression, she could not calibrate how she actually felt with how she wanted to feel. Her desires and her aversions still held her in thrall, just as they always had, just as Vivian suspected they always would.

She sat up in bed and pulled a cigarette out from the carton on her nightstand. She put it between her teeth and lit it. Having something to do, something that let her know that her respiratory system was still taking in life, helped Vivian wait for a response. It helped time move faster, no longer snagging on small details between her words on her phone screen. Her phone vibrated once more.

-Yes, thank you. When, and where?

Vivian did not need to plan any response, it followed as naturally as if she were speaking to herself. She felt the tips of her fingers tinge with sensation, as though she were probing Lori Etmoll's face with each tap of the phone screen. Probing, tapping, and sharing contact with this bodiless name, Vivian felt a closer and more lurid proximity than she had felt with anyone she had known in a long while.

-Outside Briar Grove Apartments, 27 east Wood Ave. 6pm.

Vivian sent the message, and tightened her fingers at once around her phone, her thumb pressing down the power button and shutting off the screen into a reflective pool of dark glass, spectrally smooth. The suddenness of Lori Etmoll's message felt like a ghost attached to Vivian's life; a late-coming and inexcisable bond from across all the grids of improbability that made up the city of Newlocke. A silent frenzy went rampant in Vivian's mind, sapping her of any energy to do anything beside stare at the corner of the ceiling and let her cellphone drop to the carpet beside her bed. Even blinking felt like too much of a burden. An instant of darkness was too much time spent alone.

Vivian thought about the painted girl on the canvas. She remembered, as clearly as though the painting had been scratched in duplicate under her eyelids, the girl kneeling on a floor, the devouring background, the partial face and the relaxed limbs. Vivian saw, in the space of the ceiling, what had once made her want to keep the painted girl to herself. She and Vivian were the same in one respect; two entities in a city of multitudes, just barely able to comprehend how lonely they both were.

The painting leaned against the outer wall of Vivian's apartment building, face-down with its wooden spacers, scarred and stapled, out against hot air. In the sunshine, the back of the canvas was unsightly bright, and even the rot on the wood seemed less severe than Vivian knew it to be. But the back of the painting still seemed to have fused to its own shadow, and the wooly rot bore a dimpled texture, like skin pressed against the concrete sidewalk. Vivian held her cigarette between her lips, whose fearful jittering wetted the orange filter-paper with saliva. She gave that cigarette all her attention, in thankfulness for it giving Vivian a conspicuous reason to be standing outside her apartment. As the narrow crowds of people streamed up and down the street, their movement made Vivian see the strangeness of her own stillness. She had nowhere to go, nowhere to be. She was a ward of nobody's patience, heading toward no other destination. She was where she was supposed to be, and no one else knew it. To them, and thus to herself, Vivian was acting irregular by standing still on the sidewalk while everyone else was moving. Only her cigarette gave her any obvious reason to be outside. Vivian savored each breath, trying to keep the cigarette burning as long as possible, even as its smoke-plume started to slim, waving in the warm breeze like a defeated flag.

Vivian held her left hand behind her back, since it was still wrapped under bandages, and she didn't need more people staring at her. No one else had torn interdigital folds on their hands, that Vivian could see. They walked with their hands hanging inactively by their sides, swinging with their legs in comfortable momentum. Vivian wouldn't be the kind of person to walk like that; it took up too much space. While her left hand stayed behind her back, Vivian's right hand had sunk to the depth of her pocket, beside her knife, whose metal handle-scales were sticky with sweat.

The sun cast a heavy, brazen glow over every surface, hostilely bright, as though the sun was setting directly into the Earth itself. Vivian lowered her eyes into her own shadow to keep away from the lashing brightness. She felt empty, filled with dust and unbreathed air, like a human antique. And like an antique, Vivian waited by the curb of the sidewalk, simultaneously regarded by everyone and by no one at all. Like an antique, she was unusable; she didn't know what to do with herself. With so many people around, Vivian was that much more aware of the parameters of her own existence, and all the places

where she began and ended. Her hands, legs, and head were the ends of her tactile sensation. The highway and the train station were the ends of her sightline. But there were so many more bodies, so many more hands and legs and heads and perspectives, each one appearing from one point in the city and vanishing into another, that all of Vivian's sensations felt worthless against all theirs. The world extended outside the city of Newlocke, beyond the East Coast and the Appalachians in the west. Sunset over Newlocke was midnight somewhere else. It made no difference. Vivian didn't matter.

Vivian leaned against the wall of her apartment building, next to the painting. She let her left hand dangle at her side, the skin sweltering below the bandages, throbbing alongside her heartbeat. The nearby heat of her cigarette smoke began to brush against her face, blown back by the breeze. She wished there was a word for that, for the whole category of things bothered her; heat from things close-by.

With her cigarette reduced to a smoldering filter, Vivian flicked it away from her, facing away from the painting so that no ash would get onto it. With her right hand, Vivian felt for the box in her pocket, but inside it, she felt only the plastic casing of her lighter, and no cigarettes. Her justification for being outside had expired. Vivian withdrew both hands from both her pockets, and pinched the skin on her left hand over the bandages with her right, punishing herself for her forgetfulness with a sudden sting of pain.

As the bite of pain subsided, Vivian considered going back into her apartment. She considered the possibility of blocking Lori Etmoll's number, keeping the painting to herself, and finding whatever ways possible to forget the past weeks. There was nobody else standing still on the sidewalk, nobody else standing guard to a back-turned painting that sat on the ground, and any reason for Vivian to be the only one doing so wasn't worth the trouble of being seen doing it. Shuddering the pain away from her left hand, Vivian started toward the painting, her eyes closed with regret.

"Excuse me," she heard someone say.

The voice was stiff and pliant, with each sound carefully directed. Every consonant was meticulous with attention, flitting through the air like stabilizing feathers on the back of an arrow, firing straight through Vivian's head. She opened her eyes. The orange sunlight washed over her again, and

Vivian saw the source of the voice standing a few paces in front of her. The invoker was a woman in a purple coat, extending down to her knees with her hands angled into pockets at her sides. The coat seemed light, but was still lined with some sort of fur or felt, that Vivian thought would be still too hot for springtime. The coat was buttoned up to the lapels, which were turned upward into an incomplete fabric bulwark around the woman's neck and nape. She had a slight forward bend to her posture, and her mud-brown hair was tied in a bun at the back of her head, with some escaped strands circling around her ears and upon her cheeks. Vivian recognized this woman's features in the way they ruptured Vivian's memory. This woman was the subject of the painting.

"Excuse me," she repeated, pulling one hand from her coat-pocket to point at Vivian, then past her, toward the painting leaning against the apartment-building wall.

"Are you—" the woman started. Vivian felt her chest tighten with nervousness, sealing herself in a burning sensation that left her unable to hear the rest of this woman's question. Vivian, on wordless impulse, extended her hand to her, leaving whatever question she might have asked unanswered. The faster Vivian could shepherd conversation away from her own mishearing, the sooner the burning sensation would leave her.

"I'm Vivian DeKalb," Vivian said. Her sanded-wood voice was little more than a nervous creak, as though infected with rot.

The woman in the purple coat shook Vivian's hand. Her grip was apprehensive and uncertain; Vivian felt as though she was pulling the woman's arm out toward herself, and that it would spring back into her coat-pocket the moment that Vivian let go.

"I'm Lori," she said. "Is that my painting?"

Lori glanced toward the canvas behind Vivian as the pair's hands separated; Lori's back into her coat pockets, Vivian to behind her back, where she cradled her bandaged left hand with the same fingers that had earlier roused its pain.

"Yeah," Vivian answered. "It is."

She saw Lori's eyebrows narrow at the bottom spacers on the canvas, where the rot had grown thickest and where Vivian's stapling was most noticeable. As Lori's eyes squinted, as her expression strove for austere disregard, Vivian saw once more the image of the painted girl.

"It's a self-portrait, right?" Vivian asked.

Lori's eyes widened again, and Vivian saw her hands clench within her jacket-pockets. Lori took a half-step forward, nearly leaning over Vivian.

"Listen," Lori said, her voice inflected sharply. "I'd really rather not talk about it. Just give me my painting, and I'll be gone. Alright?"

Vivian stepped to her side, blocking the painting by the wall from Lori's approach. She felt her arms fall to her sides again, widening her stance. Lori's eyes met her own, arresting with impatience. Vivian felt a sickness in her gut, a physical sense of incorrectness, but she pushed it deeper within her, leaving vacancy behind it.

"You're going to get rid of it again," Vivian decried.

"It's mine," Lori answered. "I painted it. I can do with it what I want."

Lori moved to Vivian's side, but Vivian stepped to the side to intercept. Lori lifted her arm from her pocket and reached toward the canvas, but Vivian reached it first, keeping it fast against the wall with a mitt of bandages and an overwide hand-span. The painted side of the canvas plodded against the wall with a hard gust.

"What the hell are you doing," Lori growled, through a field of spittle and teeth. "Give it to me."

Between their crossed reaches for the painting, Vivian remembered what her reason once was for keeping it in her possession to begin with. It was the unsettleable question that had constricted around her life, in whose tormenting grip Vivian had grown comfortable.

"Why did you throw it out?" Vivian asked.

Lori pressed forth toward the painting, as Vivian stood over the canvas, shielding it behind herself as her hands flattened against the wall behind her. Her mouth, absent of any feeling, brought down gulps of hot, dry air into her chest. Lori retreated a few steps, her posture subdued and ready to lunge for

the painting again, still spry and unafraid, although confused. People still filed around Vivian and Lori, turning their heads to attune to the scuffle, with bewildered stares.

Vivian took in more air and shaped it hastily into speech, spoken so quickly that she could barely hear them even as she spoke.

“Tell me, and you can have it back. That’s all I’ve wanted to know. Why did you throw it out?”

Lori stood tall again, her eyes fixed upon Vivian with angered incredulity. Her face, that Vivian recognized from the painting, looked back at Vivian with a slashing rage, as though spiteful of every moment it had been held in her apartment.

“Fine,” Lori relented. “I threw it out because I didn’t want to look at it anymore.”

Lori retreated another step, raising her voice in proportion. Vivian, signaling her own maintenance of her bargain, stepped forward from over the painting, and returned her left hand to behind her back. Her attention clung transfixed on Lori, like dribble pouring over her words.

“It was a therapy painting,” Lori explained through barely opened lips. “It was meant to help me get over what happened to me. To help me face what happened that night. But I couldn’t even bear to even look at it anymore. That’s why I threw it out. It’s not something I wanted anyone to see, not even myself. I just wanted to forget about it. But you. You took it out of the garbage. You hung up posters of it around my neighborhood. You’ve been letting everyone see it. And I tried tearing down all those posters, but you just hung up more. You’re an obsessive. A miserable, lonely obsessive, and you had to bring it back to me.”

Vivian felt her limbs weaken. Her every thought began to shrink and dissipate into an involute spiral into themselves. All Vivian had was herself, limp and ineffectual, buried alive by time. There was nothing that could be done. She had become a part of nothing, an impossible divisor into nothing. And yet there she was. She still drew breath, her brain still fed on blood and regurgitated awareness. Her blood was still wheeled through her body by her heart. Her heart, ever restless, still beat its automatic rhythm. In every physical sense, and against her every hope, Vivian was still there, powerless and guilty. Being there was all that could be done. Being there was the last thing that Vivian couldn’t fuck up.

“I’m sorry,” Vivian said.

Lori gave some reply, but Vivian could not make out the words. Lori’s voice was impenetrable, and soon it was gone, sublimated into the warmth of the dusk. Lori walked past Vivian, and picked up the painting under her arm, passing Vivian again. Her purple coat snuck off behind a wall of pedestrians.

“Wait,” Vivian called out, at a tone nowhere close to loud enough for Lori to hear as she departed with the painting. “What did you say?”

Vivian started toward the direction that Lori went down, but she was nowhere that Vivian could see, and exhaustion came for Vivian quickly. Before long, Vivian felt her knees buckling, and her guts felt broken down with decomposition. Leaving words unheard was a unique kind of solitary torment; it deformed Vivian into a creature of uncommunication, leeching off the sounds of others and giving them nothing in return.

“What did you say?” Vivian called out again, toward wherever Lori was.

The days and weeks continued, until more time had separated Vivian from the painting than the amount that she even had with the painting at all. The memory had been stowed away someplace, and Vivian had more in her life to be remembered and forgotten in all the meantime. She’d had people come into her life and go out, just as it had been before. Names and faces made their entries and exits, single-use conversations passed like boxes into the recycling heap, to be broken down at night and tossed away.

Summer had come. The days were sunny, and the nights were damp. The weeks all stuck together, flavored with the taste of sweat and punctuated by long bouts of breathlessness. Her reflective vest kept her particularly hot now, in addition to being instantly visible. Vivian had noticed that her knife started sticking to the inside of her pocket when she took it out to break down the boxes, and the longer sunlight hours made her shifts feel that much longer.

Vivian pulled out her knife and slit open the bottom-tape of a box on the ground in front of her. She lifted it by its open panels, and shook it slightly so its topside would flatten out, before folding the

cardboard and throwing it like a disc into the top of the dumpster. Her left hand had healed, but the two segments of the skinfolds never fully rejoined. Vivian accepted that her thumb would always reach out a little further now.

Gila and Conrad had moved out, and as a parting gift, Conrad had left Vivian a lead on a job opening at the county fair, which would be starting up soon. But even that would be temporary, and Vivian would need another daytime job to afford rent on her when autumn would come. Keeping her mind in the present was an imprecise and slippery task. Usually, it was not worth the effort.

Vivian picked up the next box. It was of the cheaper kind of cardboard, reinforced along every edge with packing tape. She inserted her knife-tip into the corner of the box, and sliced along the closest side.

In her periphery, Vivian saw a familiar man, the old one in a loose bucket-hat. He came out every few days, always in the same hat, and always for an uneased smoking session in the evening. His jovial smile when he saw Vivian intruded on the skin-space around his eyes.

“Hello,” he said.

Vivian could hear his greeting clearly, but that didn’t really matter. She could hear the cars rolling by on the street, on the other side of Maro Park Apartments, and she could hear the clattering of the air conditioning units in the neighboring complexes. Vivian saw the old man, and the well-formed shadows in the sunlight, and the sandy brown of the cardboard mound in front of her. She felt the stickiness of her knife-blade through her glove, left there by the packing tape. Vivian smelled cigarette smoke and dust, garbage and her own perspiration, all mixing together.

She knew they were all there, just as she knew that the old man only wanted some smoking companionship. She knew they were all there, but those observations had nowhere to go once inside of Vivian. None of it was worth the effort.