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A MARRIAGE SEWN TOGETHER

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A MARRIAGE SEWN TOGETHER

By

Marie Curran

THESIS

Submitted to
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In partial fulfillments of the requirements
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

(A MARRIAGE SEWN TOGETHER)

This thesis by Marie Curran is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

A MARRIAGE SEWN TOGETHER

By

Marie Curran

A Marriage Sewn Together is a creative writing thesis in three parts. Forming the thesis is a collection of very short essays, *A Startling Passage*, a short story, “Perigee,” and a novella, *This Is Not Our Revolution*. The latter pieces are fictional and take place in rural settings. All three pieces include explorations of questions concerning birth, beginnings, “original sin,” land, and the tension of balancing personal relationships with political or community ideals. The works are rooted in realism, and sometimes tend toward the lyric. As indicated in the introduction, the three works in *A Marriage Sewn Together* build off of each other over a three year period.

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I am thankful for the writers whose words helped me to also write. “Chapter Two: All that is Wild and Good” of *This Is Not Our Revolution* is inspired by the words of Henry David Thoreau, “All good things are wild and free.”

I am thankful for the inspiration I’ve found for my writing in the rural Upper Peninsula and many of its small farms I have been able to visit during my time here. I am thankful for what I have learned about traditional foods, and so much, more, while working in the Center for Native American Studies at NMU. My family has been an enormous source of help and encouragement as I have pursued this project and the MFA degree while also becoming a mother, and I am very grateful for this. And I am grateful to Neal, for everything.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....1

PART ONE: A Starting Passage.....22

For Judith: A Note about Blood and Trust.....22

Birth Story26

Birth of a Father30

The Midwife Believes:.....31

Milk35

On Human Reproduction38

Wording40

Pregnancy Rules from the Internet44

To Kara, After Our Births47

But What Will I Tell Her about God53

Unspeakable, Unspeakable56

Reading Books to Babies60

PART TWO: Perigee.....64

PART THREE: This Is Not Our Revolution.....82

Part I.....82

Chapter One: To Edgar82

Chapter Two: All that is Wild and Good.....93

Chapter Three: To Edgar100

Chapter Four: Scratch Creek.....	107
Part II	113
Chapter Five: To Edgar.....	113
Chapter Six: Last Things	120
Chapter Seven: To Edgar	137
Part III.....	145
Chapter Eight: From the leather-bound journal of the editor of <i>Harvest Basket Quarterly</i>	145
Chapter Nine: Past Ripe.....	147
Chapter Ten: To Edgar.....	180
Chapter Eleven: <i>Harvest Basket Quarterly</i> vs. Scratch Creek Farm	188
Chapter Twelve: Rough Draft.....	191
Works Cited.....	194

INTRODUCTION

Year One, 2013-2014

A week before the fall semester of my first year as Master of Fine Arts in creative writing candidate, I knew—*exactly*—what would be my thesis. Previously I had been working at a religiously-affiliated therapeutic nursery center whose students had experienced systemic poverty and trauma, and I just *knew* my novel was the harrowing story of corrupted churches and racist adoption agencies, black single mothers and stolen black children, and middle-class white thirty somethings who happened to be infertile, marching, with their glittering good intentions, straight to hell. It would be called *Epigenesis* and it would be awesome.

Very quickly, I wrote fifty pages, and then I found myself staring down at a positive pregnancy test. Around that time, I also began to wonder if, in my novel, I was taking some liberties around race and the prerogative to tell a story. I am not black, nor single, nor systemically impoverished. Everything became complicated, and as my child grew inside me, my writing slowed. Or, that's what it felt like. But when I open those old documents from that first year, there's a lot: 30,000 words that were not taking me where I wanted to go.

In the meantime, I read. Books and books, most that I liked, and found smart and exciting. All of them affected me on the craft level. Some were helping to reveal interests I held—questions about community commitments versus individual freedoms, and the

seeming futility of trying to do right, or, put simply, the idea of “original sin”—and pushing me towards new projects.

In Hanna Pylväinen fragmented third-person novel *We Sinners*, a Finnish-American family that is part of an ultra-conservative Lutheran sect that does not believe in makeup, alcohol, or birth control grows up and out, splinters bitterly, persists in love, and again and again, wonders, *why?* Each family member takes a turn in the spotlight, and Pylväinen uses these shifting perspectives to shine on intimate knowledge on one character in another character’s chapter. For example, in the chapter “We Sinners,” Pylväinen writes, “The Karvonen boys were in town and Tiina didn’t mean to dress carefully, but she did. All her sisters did, *even Brita, who was pregnant again*” (86) (italics added for emphasis). There is intimacy and judgment layered throughout the novel. In a surprising ending, the final chapter retraces the religion’s brutal roots in nineteenth century impoverished northern Finland.

In *Arcadia*, Lauren Groff is quick to lay down the rules, and introduce the characters of the novel’s intentional community world—“The women in the river, singing. This is Bit’s first memory, although he hadn’t been born when it happened” (1)—and in doing so shows how a life is set in motion in a particular context, beautiful and dysfunctional, before it even begins. In Hilary Plum’s novel on a young anti-war activist household that is exhausted by tragedy, *They Dragged them through the Streets*, the personal and political very obviously overlap in short chapters in a structure similar to Pylväinen’s, except in a somewhat cryptic first person. Throughout this short text, the tension between wanting to create a good life and actively resisting evil is palpable. In

one scene, Sara, a nurse, who does not want a child, sits on a bus with a pregnancy test hidden in her purse. Plum writes:

And if yes, what? Imagine the possible futures, the palm across the lower belly and the ache in breasts nourishment not desire. I picture... a toddler, in front of me where the path widens on the way to the stream behind A's. Tire tracks, fox prints, rabbits, deer: the child, my child, among them. This isn't possible: I don't live there anymore, we don't go to that place together, that's past (97).

These novels I was reading all ask, in their own ways, *Can there be promise and freedom in a new life?* And *maybe*, they respond, also, in their own ways. *Maybe, maybe not.*

But what else was I reading, in this season of dramatic hormonal and physical change?

As I do each December, I read the Magnificat. I find myself in churches during Advent, despite “losing my faith” years ago. So was the case in 2013. I have a background in studying biblical literature, and, although, I was pregnant and economically limited, like this supposed mother of God, as an educated white American I have to situate my own context on the Empire side of things. “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,” (*New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Luke 1:51b) this Lukan Mary sings.

And I was reading the manuals and blogs and internet articles and all the never ending words on how a woman can coax a newborn baby from a body. But first, how to treat that body—*my* body—before the baby's grand entrance. Like: what to eat and not

eat, the squats to do if the baby should face the right way, the yoga poses to avoid if the baby is facing the wrong way (and arguments decrying the use of “right” or “wrong” when talking about a fetal position!). Then, as I entered my third trimester, I read about how to treat that baby after she arrived. How to name her, talk to her, think about her, not overthink her care, swaddle or not swaddle her, dress her, lay her down for rest, and always the right way, because for infants sleeping can be fatal. I was immersed in a literature whose currency was the million things that can go wrong in all the stages of motherhood, and, of course, the million and one good choices I could make to guarantee and full and happy life for this little future person.

As I neared giving birth I primarily read pregnancy, childbirth and mothering literature. Sure, it was often low quality, but it felt responsible, instinctive. Looking back, I see how my sinking in these materials affected my writing, and the projects ahead of me.

I birthed my little daughter, and she was healthy and perfect. My novel still died. I couldn't admit that to myself the summer after my first year, but deep inside, I knew *Epigenesis* had failed, or I had failed *Epigenesis*. But something—I couldn't verbalize it then—had survived—was emergent—and as I fed my infant child, I also fed quiet obsessions.

Year Two, 2014-2015

A word from writer Bret Lott to set the stage:

We all have different places in which the world seems to present itself in its mystery and beauty, its sorrow and grief, its vast breadth and its

ultimate intimacy. And because all these places are different—mine will never be yours and yours will never be mine—this sacred place is ripe for exploration, and ripe for sharing. For where else on the planet are you more you—are you more a partaker in the whole of man’s estate—than in that place where you are alone, and you are simply and complexly and utterly you (24).

At the start of my second MFA year, my daughter was three months old. I was sleep deprived and breast feeding, but also energized by the oxytocin. After a summer of spending every day, all day, with my young daughter, I was excited to get back to school, and to write more, but also too exhausted and disorganized to pick up the pieces of *Epigenesis*. In a flash nonfiction workshop, I began writing birth stories, weekly, for twelve weeks straight. These pieces, now together titled *A Startling Passage*, became the true start of my MFA thesis, *A Marriage Sewn Together*.

Much of this body of birth writing is an indirect response to a book I read that September, Eula Biss’ nonfiction work on vaccines, *On Immunity*, which is dedicated to “other mothers.” Biss, in linked essays, writes about the extreme fear that *can* overtake new mothers, and asserts, “A child cannot be kept from his fate, though this does not stop the gods from trying” (4). To this sentiment, I wrote the satirical piece “Pregnancy Rules from the Internet,” in which I list a particular thread of conflicting info bites that bombard and disparage new mothers, especially those who are educated and have easy access to various media. And, more somberly, I took the fear head on in “Unspeakable, Unspeakable,” a fragmented essay that deals with death (or fear of) monthly throughout the gestation period. After the narrator realizes her expensive plastic mattress wrap that is

supposed to protect infants from Sudden Infant Death syndrome is a faulty product based on problematic interpretations of studies that victimize single mothers, she says:

Though these somersaults in logic strike me as sexist and full of fallacy, still I am thankful for my husband, still I wrap my cheap but new Ikea crib mattress in the bulky plastic, still I gingerly smooth out the bunching wrinkles under the white sheet as I set up the crib and count down the weeks until I will see my baby in it (13).

In the above quote, and the entire piece, there is a tension between the narrator's self-righteousness and her critical self-awareness. As the project continued, this vein intensified.

Most of *On Immunity* is about vaccines: the history of vaccines, the fear of vaccines, and the history of fear of vaccines. Biss is empathetic to vaccine-skeptical mothers while defending the intervention emphatically. I wanted to respond here, too, especially as a mother who briefly worried immunizations would hurt my daughter for reasons I could not quite understand (I ultimately decided to have her fully immunized). Biss overviews a shameful part of vaccination's past: the experimentation on poor and non-white portions of the population, for the sake of wealthy and white children. Yet she argues for vaccines today in a way that is redemptive, that when those who are well off vaccinate their children, they are protecting more vulnerable members of society, who may not vaccinate their children due to the chaos of poverty. "There is some truth...to the idea that public health is not strictly *for* people like me, but it is *through* us, literally through our bodies, that certain public health measures are enacted," Biss writes (28).

This almost religious read on vaccinations enticed me, and in my epistolary essay, “For Judith: A Note about Blood and Trust,” the narrator, in a letter to her infant daughter, discusses blood types, genocide, anxiety, and The System while detailing the necessary medical intervention—a rhogam shot—an O- mother should receive after carrying a rhesus positive baby. In this essay, and others, I dwelt in the theme of what happens when we try do right but complexity and well-intentioned wrongheadedness stops us in our tracks.

As I wrote the birth pieces that would become *A Startling Passage*, certain characters besides my husband and child kept appearing. My skilled but impersonal and science-hesitant midwife (“Nancy”), and also a rural, Fundamentalist Christian eighteen-year-old girl (“Kara”) I did not and still do not know well. Kara was a client of my midwife at the same time, with a very similar due date. Our stories became strangely entwined, not only in narrative form but in real life as our pregnancies and births unfolded. In our brief relationship, I wielded power over her in a tender moment where nobody reasonable could have expected me to do anything else. And still, she haunted—haunts—my thoughts, as evidenced in the essays where she is mentioned, and especially in the collection’s second epistolary essay, “To Kara, After Our Births.”

I knew I had to write directly about “Kara,” but I didn’t know how. During this period, I read Jessie van Eerden’s epistolary essay “Woman with Spirits,” in which van Eerden’s Appalachian narrator addresses a long-deceased neighbor as she remembers what it was like when War on Poverty photographers were commissioned to take pictures of the community. In the piece, the narrator wrestles with her own lapsed, or at least transformed, faith, her roots in rural poverty, the violence of cultural intrusion, and how

she might move forward. The prose is intentional, solid, and beautiful. This became my model for how I would write about “Kara,” and so I penned an essay *to* her. “You were holding the beef dip you brought to the vegetarian potluck when I met you, standing by the sink in your fluffy sweatshirt with the drawstring bow above your burgeoning belly” (47), “To Kara, After Our Births” begins. It was a fearsome thing to write; while the other essays trafficked in subtle tensions, “To Kara...” openly exposes a narrator’s prejudice and undeserved power. It shines an uncomfortable light on the starkly different circumstances waiting on the other side of the womb, for babies who have no say.

In the spring, I toyed with *Epigenesis*. Nothing came of this. Here I had set out to write about a young white woman destroying her community with her good intentions, and each day I sat down to write, I became more convinced that this specific form of an important narrative was one I had to put down.

My sister-in-law sent me a cookbook in the spring of 2014. It was called *The Kinfolk Table*, and was a project of the “natural” lifestyle magazine *Kinfolk*. For a long time, I’d made fun of this magazine, which features pictures of, for example, very wealthy and attractive woolen-sweatered white people drinking pour-over coffee at custom rustic tables sitting on artisan wool rugs atop perfect wooden floors. Sass like mine is customary all over the internet, as a recent article on *Kinfolk* in *Racked* quotes a forum poster as complaining, “How can anyone want to see so many pictures of Mormons eating in the woods over and over again?” (Chayka). And like many people, I also found myself a little jealous of the moneyed beauty projected in its pages.

I didn't open *Kinfolk Table* for months, but in the spring of 2015, I was entranced with two parts disgust one part awe. In the last weeks of my second year in the MFA program, I wrote a critical paper on the cookbook, analyzing certain pictures of young Portlanders standing behind thick bushes and holding plates of pie, and discussing *Kinfolk Table's* righteous language—lots of talk about organic vegetables and natural fibers and living in harmony with the wild, natural land, versus eating processed food, owning plastic things, wearing polyester, etc., women who are coiffed or are said to “float” (Williams, 270)—and what it misses:

[The author, Nathan Williams] ignores perhaps the truest obstacles to healing the long estrangement between the American and the soil: not smartphones and busy schedules, but a history of conquest and genocide, slavery and sharecropping, and a systematic destruction of ecosystems for profit that continue to this day, while the continent's Indigenous people remain disenfranchised (Curran 19).

Doing right is a multi-layered problem. The *Racked* article also asserts that *Kinfolk* is a way of life that is hard to escape from mimicking if one belongs to a certain subset of white, middle class and educated folks (Chayka). This was a personal exploration that is not yet resolved for me. I desperately want “being good” to be as simple as buying fair-trade crafts and spending meaningful time eating nutritious, non-exploiting foods with the people I love. For my consciousness's sake, I want my morals to be as simple as responsible consumerism. Of course, being a decent person is different than working for change, and even activists, if they think hard enough, probably shouldn't boast moral

superiority. I knew this disturbing phenomenon would make an appearance in my creative work, soon.

Year Three, 2015- 2016

My final year in the MFA program began in a scramble. I stopped my attempts to resurrect *Epigenesis* and filled an entire notebook with a work I called *Hot Young Farmers*. It was boring, because it had no plot, and because it was a badly executed philosophical stab at explaining contemporary back-to-the-landers and the fraught nature of small farms run by very good looking and educated white youth. But the fast and furious failure of this project helped me to better understand the identity, history and trajectory of my obsessions, and just in time, solid writing efforts took shape.

When I consider how birthing and mothering has changed the way I write (an idea *Rumpus* writer Lyz Lenz explores and defends in her recent essay “Writing My Context”), I know I hold a magnifying glass over the idea of *starting* (as in, starting out, starting fresh, starting over). And in writing *A Startling Passage*, I specifically investigated the distance I have personally traveled from my religious roots to my dumpster-diving, over-drafting wannabe radical twenty-something years, to where I am now, hopeful but also humbled by several years of marriage, new motherhood, and the uncomfortable awareness of my own limitations and wants. This process cumulated in a series of (very, very ancient and already thoroughly explored) questions: *Can anyone start out pure? What are the varieties of experience in being indoctrinated into systems, and when is that good, when is that destructive? What does it mean for a baby to assuage a nonconformist into working within systems? What happens when our battle flags are*

laid to rest? After several months of floundering, these questions pushed me, very swiftly, to write the short story, “Perigee,” and the first two drafts of a novella I am calling *This Is Not Our Revolution*. These are the final segments of *A Marriage Sewn Together*.

I spent a lot of time with Jenny Offill’s short, strange, scrappy but beautiful novel *Dep’t of Speculation*. She writes of a couple and their new child, and of the wife nearly losing her writing career and marriage. Much of the book dwells on the chaos that has visited the narrator because of her choice to be the creator of art *and* a little human. In one section, she reflects on one of her husband’s qualities that she could never share, how “He won’t just think about how unbearable it is that things keep breaking, that you can never fucking outrun entropy” (37). Throughout the novel, Offill touches on this disconcerting theme, which helped to guide my narratives into the crosshairs of compromises.

In “Perigee,” Lara, the first-person narrator, is in a quietly miserable marriage with Toby. She adores her child, whom she stays home to mother, and admires her husband’s reliability, and her life feels very boxed in and dull. Once, Lara had been a farmer, which she loved. She is very good at not thinking about her unhappiness, though, although she is taken aback by the beauty of rural landscapes.

When Lara and her family visit some farmer friends, Asher and Moira, and the night falls apart with a lapsed alcoholic, a hint of infidelity, and a trip to the E.R. after Lara’s daughter is slightly injured, Lara is reminded of tough realities about her dysfunctional marriage, friendships, and everyday life. She becomes coldly aware of her

life's inadequacies, as when during she has an intimate moment with drunk Asher at the party, she knows Toby is not searching for her, because, "after eight years of marriage, what a spouse understands best is how she is forgotten" (69). In a moment, years earlier, she gave away her life for her family's needs, and now she feels stuck.

When I wrote "Perigee," I did not know what would ultimately happen to Lara, Toby, Asher and Moira, but I did finish the story with the strong belief that people tend to keep marching along, especially women who have lost their source of income and are caring for young children. In the last scene, Lara runs into Moira at the farmers market, and asks about Asher, who she assumes is home hungover. Moira, who constantly threatens to leave Asher, glosses over the situation, and blames the full moon, saying, "It's a process, you know" (80).

Both terrible and not-so-bad partnerships continue on in the name of compromise, and sometimes the results are fine, though disasters happen too. Either way, average people tend to look inward, and care for the own, exclusive to the world around them, once children are involved, regardless of youthful idealism and plans. And this—"family values"—is another form of what we might call good. But I especially don't think this behavior—as essential as it may seem, and as enjoyable as it can be—is so deserving of praise. It is what it is, but in my writing I want to pull back any positive value statements, and take a closer look at what is lost and gained in the mysterious friction of prioritizing some relationships over others.

I imagined a community farm, a cross between the cultures in *Arcadia* and *They Dragged Them Through the Streets*. I imagined a closeness between the farm members,

almost familial, like the characters in *We Sinners*. I imagined using this community as a practice ground for almost every single question I had asked in the last three years, and in this introductory essay. I imagined this farm in the twist of change: it would be about to succeed, or dissolve completely.

Then I read Anne Valente's short fictional story "Dear Amelia," another epistolary work, which is narrated by young lobster-catching girls to Amelia Earhart. In adolescence, these girls are slowly turning into bears, and under their mothers' terse guidance, will go into hiding in the Maine forest as World War I begins. The collective nature of the address provides a sense of slippage from safety throughout the story, and the wretched inevitability of the girls' fates and the war and Earhart's disappearance is especially painful when Valente writes:

We scanned the smudged headlines for you as the July sun threw its northern heat against our backs. We dreamed of you from the restless damp of summer-soaked sheets, a heat still calming as the cold threat of war blew through our windows, drifting slowly toward our coast from the trampled soil of other lands (17).

I began my own short story in this collective form. After twenty pages, I did love the voice, yet not only had I not found a resolution for the story, I also had not quite established the world or central conflict. I had a longer work on my hands, which became *This Is Not Our Revolution*.

The basic plot: A group of idealistic but burnt-out young anarchists begin a farm in the north woods, and one of their most eccentric members is Brandy. She loves and

works hard, but only for what she finds interesting. When she becomes convinced that foraging is morally superior to agriculture, without a strong understanding of the Indigenous cultures that actually inhabited, and still inhabit, the region where she lives, and begins making demands on her co-farmers, relations become tense. After a time, she travels to Central America, and does not return. Several years pass, and the community farm, now called Scratch Creek, becomes moderately successful, although each farmer is feeling restless for something more. Brandy, who has since married, moved further south and had a son, shows up with the child, looking for work so that she can raise money for her struggling nature conservatory enterprise back home on her (white) husband's family's land, where every day she has been confronting rural violence between rich white ranchers and disenfranchised small farmers. Complications ensue, Scratch Creek enters into a deal with a natural lifestyle magazine called *Harvest Basket Quarterly* and the farmers, who have, on principle, remained childless, fall in love with and become responsible for Brandy's young son, Edgar. It is to this boy whom much of *This Is Not Our Revolution* is addressed.

As I continued to build *This Is Not Our Revolution*, I considered what ideas would be my focus, and what additional forms, besides Valente's collective address, would I use to communicate the narrative?

Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* helped me to better understand the north woods environment, as well as create Brandy's personality as one yearning to learn from the earth and plants, but unable to identify her own place in a larger context of the long

history of a place. Instead, she views the world simply: “The world was a gift, one just had to take it, she said” (85).

Throughout *This Is Not Our Revolution*, I was concerned about what it means to be connected to a place, and how despite a (white) person’s *feeling* of connection to a piece of land in North America, there is a long, violent, and continuing history of Native American genocide and marginalization contesting that felt sense of ownership or indigeneity. This conflict piggybacks off my more general obsession of the Judeo-Christian notion of “original sin.”

In Indigenous and decolonizing studies, scholars Eve Tuck and Wayne K Yang note how settlers (non-Indigenous ancestors of conquerors, etc.) try very hard to be absolved of their guilt, sometimes, at best through misguided environmental and social justice movements. There are tropes—filled by white people who are displaying certain attitudes and behaviors to appropriate indigeneity—“which problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (Tuck, Yang 4).

The farmers I’ve written about are dealing with serious personal and community conflicts, and do not seem to be outwardly haunted by the sins of *their* ancestors or ever acknowledge the roots of the land they are working. Yet there is, thanks to Brandy’s past foraging efforts, and her alarming new position in South America (where she herself is passively wedged against the Indigenous and long-oppressed laborers), combined with *all* the farmers’ backgrounds as justice-seeking anarchists, subtle unrest about their rightness and goodness. If certain scholars or Indigenous communities were to examine Scratch Creek Farm, they might claim their whole existence was one of these trope moves.

The farmers of Scratch Creek, in fleeting moments, are cognizant of guilt. Occasionally, there is a searing moment of clarity of the futility of trying to be good, as when, near the end of the novella, the collective explains to Edgar, “You let the world happen around you, navigating it with open eyes and busy fingers. What evils you were committing we could not count or see. They will haunt you when the time is right...you conquered small plants and animals to your liking” (185). The farmers’ collective conscious understands the fraught nature of ever thinking they were pure, but also, truly, what else could they, or anyone in their situation, do?

Finally, I delved back into the sparkling shallowness of *The Kinfolk Table* (which is, obviously, the model for *Harvest Basket Quarterly*, which inspires a love-hate relationship for some of the farmers). Influenced by William’s comically sterile descriptions of the people, homes and recipes he features in the cookbook, I experimented with letting the fictional editor of *Harvest Basket Quarterly* wax similarly on Scratch Creek. This outside voice, when projecting in his diary, says of the farm, demanding, “In white ceramic bowls, I want to see puddings of wild rice, alpine blueberries, maple syrup, topped with imported pistachios, the crushed seeds of cardamom pods” (145). Later, after visiting, he drafts a reflection on the farm, which is obviously struggling, “This small but expansive world is both natural and the creative result of human curation: lives spun together in intimacy with the earth, a careful listening to its rhythms. These are people who have learned to live ~~with ease~~ in a climate others might call brutal” (191) (strikethrough intentional). My hope was to add additional layers to the many conflicts of Scratch Creek, by shifting into a different viewpoint, one that blatantly prioritizes the marketability of place. When the *Harvest Basket Quarterly*

editor remarks on Scratch Creek's "essence" (145), what he means is the particular way it can be bought and sold.

Like in *Epigenesis*, I found myself struggling with some underlying themes in *This Is Not Our Revolution*. I sought to hint at the political in the subtext, without creating a heavy-handed agenda. While many novels and short stories were helpful, I appreciated Joan Silber's long fictional story "Fools" and Daniel Alarcon's novel *Lost City Radio*.

In "Fools," the young narrator overviews how her anarchist idealism and personal relationships change over about a ten year period in the pre-World War I early twentieth century. She lives with her husband in a vibrant but impoverished activist community in New York. While Silber could not escape politics in "Fools"—the characters in this story's lives are rooted in political beliefs—Silber's narrator subtly weaves in and out of talk of oppression and union strikes to sexual intimacy, all with a fresh self-awareness. In one line, the narrator says about her situation, "We were testing how to be right" (22), and a few scenes later, about sex with her husband, "Everyone thought Joe was the bolder of us, but no one knows how a couple fits together. The twists in that knot" (25).

In *This Is Not Our Revolution*, I wanted to channel this energy in the relationship between Brandy and one of the farmers, Wright, with whom she had a relationship with when they were younger. In a tense conversation where Brandy explains how in South America her life was, and will again be, in danger, Wright is repelled by her thinking as he is too emotionally closed off to consider the political weight of her situation. Below, the scene plays out:

All he could say was, Nobody would murder you, Brandy.

She laughed, shook her head, and cupped her left hand, which to Wright, was electric, around his bent right elbow... Wright didn't know the rules of Brandy's marriage, and he was not sure he cared. Marriages could end (165).

This is another example of how the characters in the narratives of *A Marriage Sewn Together*, continue to value their intimate relationships over larger-scale concerns, like the conflict on Brandy's South American land that ultimately proves deadly.

Silber's story focuses on young people who are seeking out activism, while *Lost City Radio*'s context is even closer to the political because he is writing of an unnamed war-torn Latin American country, where every person, regardless of their beliefs of activity, is scarred by violence, loss, and the current disparity. Alarcon, who was born in Peru and lost a "disappeared" uncle in Peru's civil war, keeps the details about the country and the war vague. This keeps the focus on the plot and characters, without watering down the devastating nature of war or political suppression.

In *Lost City Radio*, Norma is a beloved disc jockey who reads the names of the missing, while quietly grieving her own husband's decade-long disappearance. The trick is, she is not allowed to talk about the war on the air, or anywhere. What we learn about the radio station's culture—"The program would run on a six-second delay. This took some of the pressure off of Norma" (Alarcon 221)—provides important information about the nation's war and continually dangerous political climate. I thought of his novel as saying, *the conflict is not what this novel is about, although this novel could not exist without the conflict.*

I sought to treat Brandy's South American backdrop this way, too. My technique was to present most information through the voice of the collective, which is naturally most concerned about its own condition. "We began searching beyond the skimmed headlines of news websites. We read the—sensationalized or true?—stories of your new home—the drugs, the administrative changes, kidnappings, murders—until we couldn't" (113). Everything is tinged with doubt, and what is most important—the personal—comes soon after, wrapped in a cloak of conflict, "...imaginings of Brandy...flashlight, firearm spread across her lap, golden blaze of hair glinting against the sweating metal. We didn't want to think about whom she might be prepared to shoot" (114). And they don't. They think much more about Brandy, her love life, and their hopes and fears for their communal future.

Throughout drafting the novella, I struggled with how to balance the collective address with other close-third person perspective sections. Once again, Lauren Groff's work held inspiration. In her novel *Fates and Furies*, one story is told from two sides, but often, an unnamable, or subconscious voice cuts through the narrative with a correction, affirmation, or clarification in brackets: "Now her life showed itself to have been in a different shape, equal and opposite to the first. [Complex, our Mathilde; she can bear contradictions]" (210). Groff writes about the novel's co-protagonist. I experimented with including snippets from the collective voice in third person sections, but ultimately chose not to do this. However, I practiced Groff's technique on a different scale, cycling the collective throughout the novel, sometimes providing slightly conflicting explanations about life on Scratch Creek Farm.

This Is Not Our Revolution is a self-defeating title, if a revolution is what is desired. Or, it's an excuse, either for peace, but maybe for complacency. My hope is that this novella evokes a feeling somewhere in between.

Conclusion

Near the beginning of *This Is Not Our Revolution*, the collective voice considers the farm “one big marriage sewn together” (89). I feel that way about this entire thesis project, as it is many pieces in one body, and many approaches to a similar set of questions preoccupied with beginnings and righteousness. Every finished work has roots in narratives I cast aside, in books I read, and even my experiences. And like Scratch Creek Farm, the evolution of *A Marriage Sewn Together* is not complete. While I will not revise “Perigee” again, as it has found a home in *Mud Season Review*, I have plans for the other works. I will focus on certain essays, especially those featuring “Kara” in *A Startling Passage*, and will likely examine that narrative in light of the biblical Magnificat. In *This Is Not Our Revolution*, I will write more deeply about the land that is Scratch Creek Farm, and also further intensify the interpersonal conflicts.

What I do not want in these pieces are hopelessness, or doom. I don't know exactly what *will* be hopeful in newer versions of *A Startling Passage* and *This Is Not Our Revolution*, but I will conclude this introduction with a last thought, a poem by long-suffering little recognized poet Catherine Breese Davis, who died alone, poor, and mentally ill:

Something to Be Said

They who lie down each night with gloom,
Who listen to the false alarms

Of crones who give the flesh no room,
Who see no grace in glitter, joy, or bloom
And do without it,

Keep their potato patches hoed;
But there are some things safety harms,
And order, too, will discommode
When all the roses miles around explode—
No doubt about it.

There may be something to be said
For saying over: Fill your arms
With roses; in your last worst bed
You will be neither grieved nor comforted.
Be quick about it (62).

PART ONE

A STARTLING PASSAGE

For Judith: A Note about Blood and Trust

You, my little daughter, are of my blood, but not of my blood. A, not O, positive, not negative. This means your blood has the Rhesus factor, which means the D antigen is on your red blood cells, and not mine, and this matters. Once, when I longed for your conception but took tiny pills to prevent it, I read up on why my blood type is significant in pregnancy, but the science confused me. And most of what I found on the Internet taught me more about human behavior than biology.

There are some websites dedicated to discerning what blood types mean for diet, personality, the future. One features a doctor who's been called a quack in other places. He made lots of money writing a book in which he explains how the O archetype was the first human, a shrewd and ruthless killer. If I listen to him, I should avoid dairy, gluten, instead think rabbit leg, think berries, think hunting and gathering in the hinterlands, where my stronger-than-average fight-or-flight instinct won't give me hypertension.

This is not all; on other web forums, there are people who believe blood type tells us much more than what foods to avoid. They speculate that while your Rh+ blood indicates heritage from the rhesus monkey, my negative suffix hints of alien ancestry,

biblical visitations from gods in spaceships, the Nephilim, fallen angels who mated with primates, in Europe, and were the way white skin came to be. Ethnic Basque and Celtic people are the most likely to be O-, but rarely Africans, Asians from the east, I read. Much is implied here.

These are things you should consider, my daughter, the way humans build complicated one-way bridges across the earth, across cyberspace, and then wonder about genocide.

One thing I know for sure is that unlike me, you are not a universal donor, though I do not donate, though I should. I also understand we are at odds, our negative and positive natures, not just in eugenics friendly cyber clubs, but for real.

Before you were born, I asked my midwife to lay out the blood problem to me in language I could understand, and my grasp improved. And so three days after I birthed you, when the midwife came back to visit, I voluntarily received an injection—a rhogam shot—of Rh immune globulin antibodies. This was to prevent hemolytic disease, or anemia of the fetus, if I were to have another baby.

I can't explain this as well as I wish, but I can tell you that the antibodies bound themselves to my blood cells to protect a potential future sibling from you, via me, in case our bloods mixed when I groaned you out that grueling night, in case your positive corrupted my negative, in case my corrupted blood were to later attack a new bundle of cells that would become your brother or sister and cause it to become anemic, which could be fatal. If necessary someday, this binding will halt my hyper-immune response, which will prevent the blood war that some isolated, scared people staring at screens in

their living room corners claim is the purifying attribute of my Rh- blood. In case we all need saving from those perverse prophecies condemning the mixing of gods and monkeys, of negatives and positives, I laid flat my forearm to the midwife's needle.

Yet my midwife had come to doubt, even fear, this preventative measure, she told me in the weeks before your arrival. The doctor I saw said the shot was imperative, and was angry I had refused the prenatal version when she had offered it. Looking back, I am too, and wish I had not been so contrarian about something I did not understand, but my midwife worried that any rhogam injection's benefit—protection for a nonexistent fetus from an unlikely disease possibly prevented by consumption of vitamin C—did not outweigh its risk—accepting foreign blood into my veins. When I asked her to order the rhogam shot anyway, she did, but asked me questions: What if my body rejected the antibodies, and I grew sick? What if they were contaminated? And she hinted, obliquely, what if money-hungry companies had let one vial of bad blood get through in haste, and I would be the sacrifice on the altar of profits?

My little one, you won't grow up hearing that kind of talk, exactly. I think I've expelled the last of it. Because though I hope your father and I can instill skepticism, but not paranoia, in your thinking, I also hope you taste the fruit of trust. If you'd been born years earlier, I would have paid the midwife's fringe concerns more heed, and the beginning of our life together would have looked much different. My twenties, though sloppy in practice, were the manifestation of a single intent: to buck "the system," a term you will surely learn if you go to college, when it rolls off the tongue of your angsty peers as they sit in dim rooms and drink dark beers.

I bucked, your father too. Unheated homes, a failed sustainable farm, herbal remedies cooked up in dirty kitchens, dumpster diving that started off as a statement, but became a little more essential, were the milestones of those years. We dreamt of a life in the country with our friends, bright baskets of vegetables, bicycles, heirloom hens, homeschooled children whom public systems would never test, never tarnish as we had been tested and tarnished. Undergraduate loans would disappear with collapsing banks. It seemed so plausible, somehow.

While waiting for our private Utopia, banks were bailed out and we grew weary. We sold pork illegally, using permanent markers to black out the not-for-sale labels on the vacuum-sealed plastic, let the dead-finger turnips we over planted sit in the garage, feast of rodents. When the firewood got wet, we huddled on our bed, and ate fast food chicken tenders. As we considered applying for food stamps, our customers allowed forgotten, beautiful, underpriced produce to rot in their refrigerators. When we were lonely, we liked to get drunk on beer we couldn't afford, and after a while we were always lonely. One day a neighboring cow broke the fence and nearly trampled the garden, and I screamed and screamed underneath the gnarled pecan tree.

We realized our minds, our lives, were going to shit all because we were hell-bent on saying no to a society that we didn't want to hate in whole anymore. But we fled for jobs in the city in the last leg of youth, and in June 2014, nearing thirty, as you slept by my side, I shook my head to the midwife's hesitation, pinched my hip as I prepared for the brief sting, and the cells of other humans I do not know entered my bloodstream.

Birth Story

Note:

Throughout my uncomplicated pregnancy I read birth testimonials on a popular website whose mission is to promote birth as a natural human process, not an event to fear. This site affirms maternity, birth, and postpartum choices of all stripes in an often hostile and judgmental online culture. *I am strong*, one contributor might say, *because I refused Pitocin from my pushy OB*. Another, *I am strong because I did not breastfeed because I knew I needed to take antidepressant's*, and there is an apostrophe, and this is okay, maybe, because why not celebrate women who are refusing to attack each other? Eventually I stopped reading these entries because I felt no fear, and did not wish to be reminded that other women did.

Months later, I tell myself I may not want to have another child, and I blame my writing career, or my desire to travel, but it's really because I am afraid of birth. If I change my mind it won't be about the career, or travel, but it will be because I've forgotten, so maybe it's a good thing I'm writing it all down now.

I am nervous because in birth class the midwife warns of a bladder so full it blocked the baby's exit and had to be squeezed empty on the operating table—so we can't forget to pee in labor—and my eyes settle on the eighteen-year-old who looks worried while clutching her diet soda, and I think, I need to call you High Risk so I can be Low Risk.

I am patient because my pregnancy ends as Lake Superior heaves forth her last frozen chunks; they float out from her secret middle, chilling the shore, though it is June.

I am tough because as my husband sleeps I writhe in silence, until I am suddenly electrified and we are in the next phase of our lives.

I am flexible because when he calls the midwife she is driving one-hundred miles southwest to the eighteen-year-old, who is three weeks early, who is stealing my midnight moment, so I say oh well, and go back to bed.

I am bitter because I curse this terrified girl's false labor.

I am triumphant because when the midwife and doula finally arrive, they compliment me on my breathing technique, and I say thank you.

I am mannered because I watch my language as my mother watches me, because I don't want her to know how I really talk.

I am smart because I am right: I will not be able to keep down the peanut butter.

I am confused because first they say it will be over by lunchtime, but then there is no lunch, and then there is no time, just endless bright, and important numbers are dancing in opposite directions.

I am pained because I dare you women of childbearing age, to read about Occiput Posterior, Sunny Side Up, and imagine your pelvic bones.

I am powerless because when the midwife declares her plan, my husband cries, *Won't that rip the head off*, and she laughs, and I say okay.

I am lucky because once upon a time there was a woman like me who had no clever midwife or clever technology, who died of exhaustion, entrapping her almost baby.

I am victorious because my daughter cries out for the first time before permanently exiting my body.

I am depleted because in the bathtub I shake for an hour, curled into a crescent until my bladder releases, and as the midwife tests reflexes and counts ten toes I cannot even look.

I am adaptable because in the morning we are a family in love, and there is coffee and the Finnish breakfast bread I froze in anticipation of this glorious day, and I am already formulating the heroic story I will tell my friends, but not before I put a lot of it away: I put something away when I say it was worth it, which is true, and I put something away when I say what is required of new mothers, that I could do it again, but this is empty.

I am strong because I absorbed the birth so my baby would not have to, and she, a thriving, content child, suckles my breast without hidden trauma, and I lose myself in thought wondering if bones were cracked, and if so, how I will know they have healed.

I am grateful, I am stunned, and I am aware of my delicate place in the land of the living, because as I hike through the forest a nurse friend tells me knows of a physician who nicked an artery while flipping a baby like mine, and the mother bled out on her bed, and while he carries my cooing daughter, I bleed out in my way too, paling and freezing and fitting myself into the grove of diseased birch we are passing through.

Birth of a Father

"The moment a child is born, the mother is also born."—Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh

By night, cocooned in his blanket for one. He watches his wife, in long pajamas, sleep an S around their offspring, protecting the perfect, silent child from him. He then closes his eyes, and rest is fast and heavy. A fluttering breath or north wind might not disrupt him. A soft limb might be a pillow in slumber, and sometimes she nudges him awake, this woman who used to ask him to wrap his limbs around her, and whispers that he's getting too close. If he's not awake enough to register her words the first time, she hisses them a second.

In the morning, he rises to disorientation in a long dark hall. He can't remember entering it, doesn't know what door took him there, and he's all turned around. While wandering the hall, he tries tilting his body this way and that, but he can't get standing correctly, though there are moments of respite, the cooing babe biting his nose, or, in the doorway with his wife, a kiss on the mouth, before he tastes the venom.

The Midwife Believes:

1. that in the water, there will be ripping. All the girls say, *It's the natural epidural*, and the midwife nods as they describe their plans of the perfect water birth. The books show pictures of bikini-topped women holding up their vernixy babes over the clear blue, but the midwife knows there's no getting out of the pickle that is birth; she tells these hopeful primigravidas where they can rent the tubs anyway. This slight woman, nearly sixty, with large knuckles, prominent veins visible under latex gloves, has seen a tissue-paper perineum dissolve beneath a crowning head, and she doesn't like stitching. If the midwife can keep an eager woman out of the water, then she has access to the vagina: beginning location of one life, point of injury to the other. When her hands can go as they please, the midwife wards off tears and hemorrhages, she kneads skin into impossibility.

2. childbirth can be fatal. Things go wrong. She is not recommended, across the state line and two hundred miles of snowy highways, because she is warm, or talks about birth as if it's one big orgasm as it's often portrayed in midwifery literature, but because nobody ever dies when she is in charge. Hesitant homebirthers take comfort in the midwife's acknowledgment of mortality, and her resistance to it thus far.

3. in breast milk. But breastfeeding can be hard, and early latching, which also decreases the chance of postpartum hemorrhage, is important for a successful nursing relationship. After she catches a baby, the midwife places the new wet human on the mother's deflating middle, as close to the nipple without straining the umbilical cord, which is still pulsing with blood from the placenta. Then the father cuts the cord, and the crying

newborn is moved to the breast, coaxed to nurse. The mother is too weak to hold her child, to push out the placenta, and wants to be spoon fed ice cream, or sleep, or go back in time to when there was no baby. As the mother lies there begging for things she cannot have, the doula helps the newborn's lips clamp down on pink areola. *Push*, the midwife says, *Push now, and don't stop*, to the mess between the trembling mother's legs. It's all very bloody, and tense, but the midwife visits a few days later, and sees the contented mother feeding her rosy infant from shiny engorged breasts.

4. in the Father, Son, Holy Spirit. She keeps tracts in her bathroom for visiting patients to read, but the grist of her religion is in her work with the body. If human animals are created in the Lord's image, then God is not only powerful, but elastic. The midwife prays by the side of a laboring mother during transition. As the mother wafts in and out of consciousness, her organs and bones prepare to move beyond her understanding of her own physicality. The midwife has come to trust this shifting as the stuff of faith.

5. a vegetarian diet is superior. She may soon believe a vegan diet is too, as she is eliminating dairy because of suspected allergy. She asserts she has these allergies to animal products because her mother, in the twilight-sleep era when women were strapped into cots and then drugged for the birthing of their babies, was not able to breastfeed her. She hints at this to her patients, while suggesting tofu recipes.

6. ultrasounds harm fetuses, and should only be used when complications are suspected. When her patients also see doctors for prenatal care, the midwife bristles because they

always recommend at least one or two, as routine. *The ultrasound can hurt babies in ways we don't know yet*, she says when an expecting mother explains that her doctor needs to verify that all her child's parts, like the stomach and brain, exist, before endorsing a homebirth.

7. Cesarean section is more dangerous than vaginal delivery. Current medical literature concurs, but the local hospital's C-section rates, while not public, are high. The midwife does consider this surgical intervention occasionally necessary and lifesaving, if the baby is footling breech, or if there is placenta previa, yet she has tricks up her sleeve for other kinds of complicated. The midwife will reach in to take hold of a stubborn baby's head and flip it upside down in the canal, if she has to, before driving a long-laboring mother to the hospital.

8. that one of her five children had polio, in the United States, in the 1980's. Yet because she raised her children with excellent immune systems, which breastfeeding and healthy eating facilitated, the child was unscathed, she tells her birthing class. Same applied for her two children who fell ill with whooping cough, another preventable disease.

9. in hand washing. She credits this everyday hygienic exercise as the primary explanation for decreased childhood mortality, and as a noninvasive compliment to God's gift of immunity. The midwife also explains these ideas in birthing class, while holding up an old, Xeroxed pamphlet titled "Should You Trust Vaccines?"

10. doctors do more harm than good. She cites the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as evidence, when doctors attended births after touching the dead without washing their hands. Many thousand women then died from puerperal, or childbed, fever, which doctors attributed to the loose morality of the afflicted mothers. These were the doctors, she tells the pregnant women in her charge, who first persecuted midwives.

11. a woman's body reflects a holy power in childbearing, yet like the earth, should be tended, nourished, and given space for fallowness. While she worries over the side effects from hormonal birth control, she is also concerned for the thinning uteruses and sanities of several of her clients who credit God's Plan for their many children, close in age. At six-week postpartum appointments, the midwife removes from a closet a small box containing a cervical cap, and speaks in hushed tones, as if this twenty-percent ineffective piece of silicone is a forbidden secret, a novel hex.

12. a story she heard. A tribal woman's milk was administered, drop by drop, onto the pale tongue of a sick missionary. She does not know to which tribe this woman belonged, or on what continent, or if this nursing mother had consented to the man's treatment. *But he healed in full*, she tells her birthing class, her group of mothers who have only recently felt the swelling of their breasts, first drops of leaked colostrum wet and sticky on the bed sheets in the morning. *It was like magic.*

Milk

Elm Mott, Texas, on the communal training farm, 2009, and the road to the dairy barn was muddy in the early morning. Blue glow seeped through mesquite from the east, and when my boyfriend let go my gloved hand, I felt autumnal cold where his finger had plugged the ratted wool. The nannies' complaints of engorged udders, hunger for breakfast, grew louder. *Maws* padded sound gaps between sloshing galoshes, grackles waking in their trees, rooster's crows. We swung wide the dairy doors, and much had to be done before these goats were to be granted relief, before we could take their milk.

I filled both sinks with water, capful of sanitizer in each, for the processing equipment. While my boyfriend read the livestock manager's instructions, I assembled lids on buckets. Suzie, number five, the little one whom Rasputin mounted too early when the fence broke, had mastitis. Discard her milk, the whiteboard said. There was the sweeping of stanchions, the removal of stainless steel pitchers and the large funnel bowl from the cold water, the stubborn ring I would force flush into the bowl's hole over a paper filter. Impurities—hair, mostly—were left behind, thrown in the trash.

The nannies entered the barn, one by one. Triple Teat, number seven, herd matron, tall and tan Alpine, was in first, and rushed the feed bin, which was not closed tight. In the chaos, five more goats busted through, but three weren't even on rotation, and were corralled back out. Saxon, the ugly old Saanen, acquiesced to her lot, stanchion twelve, and *mawed* in satisfaction as she ate her apportioned feed. My boyfriend closed the wooden bars around her neck, so she couldn't escape. Ally, who looked like a devil in a medieval painting and hated us, didn't cooperate so well, and then there was Squash and Cookie and Duchess and then Suzie, who was skinny, whose eyes radiated shock, whose

udder, teats were red hot to the touch. She did not eat her food. We took note of this, and took note, after the brushing and the iodine udder washing, after the discovery of two renegade shitting hens who made it inside earlier and now browsed for fallen pellets, after re-cleaning the floor, that Suzie's milk swirled pink, produced chunks on the test strip, despite the antibiotics, and something was amiss.

We began milking. Tension eased from the room as the buckets splashed with drips and sprays, and the bulging udders grew slack. I swear I saw one goat sigh. I looked at my boyfriend whom I knew I would love forever, and wondered what awaited me in life.

After the processing and bottling, we led the herd to a virgin block of rye and clover, which they leapt through as if kids again. All except Suzie, whose condition my boyfriend would soon depict to the concerned livestock manager. She would abandon her oatmeal and coffee to drive Suzie to the vet. But it was not time for breakfast quite yet, and in the pasture my boyfriend wrapped his arm around my waist, and the wet grass slapped the rubber of my boots in the warming wind, in the light of the rising sun.

In thirty more sunrises I became a fiancé, seven times that a spouse, in five more years, mother to a daughter, and now I breastfeed her. There are similar routines: washcloths, two books, a pen, computer, manual pump, coffee, a glass of water, fully charged phone, a protein-rich snack lined up on the couch before my husband leaves for work around dawn. He keeps the hungry baby laughing while I complete the steps, and each morning I look forward to the moment when what is hard becomes soft, when my child empties me and fills herself.

Yet, all that was far off. Later that day the livestock manager would return, backseat vacant where Suzie had been. We would leave the field of pumpkins, chard, trellised peas to hear of infection gone systemic, to the blood, to the brain, and we would ask how something so natural could go so wrong.

I asked this question again in three years, when I accompanied a nursing friend, a Ph.D. in English university adjunct, to the doctor, to watch her young children while she had an abscess removed from her breast. A case of mastitis had not responded to the initial round of antibiotics. After the appointment she opened her blouse to feed her baby, the bandage puckering from red tissue. It's not forever, she said

When stricken with the third fever since I birthed my baby, the fever neither garlic pills nor cabbage leaf compresses nor comfrey salve massages under hot showers could squelch because the infection had gone too far, the PA lifted my paper gown and gasped; she could feel heat before she even touched skin.

Long before any of this, these mother goats pranced with easy hearts, as the day broke open. Their udders would not replenish to the point of discomfort for several more hours, but I didn't need to think about this because we were not alone on that land; two more interns would come in and do the whole thing again. I hadn't considered the luxury of many helping hands and told my boyfriend I might like to own dairy goats on the future farm we planned to grow from fallow hill to paradise. He, usually a dreamer with me, shook his head though, and said, "Would you really want to be tied down like that?"

On Human Reproduction

My baby's head bulged in my back. This slow pelvic trauma rocked me. I rocked the sink. Its base cracked up out of the linoleum. Earlier, I knew I had human intelligence to thank for feminism and ideas about souls. But in my bathroom, none of that mattered. I was a vessel, a fact not to be transcended by all that I believed. Marie who wrote, who made excellent tacos, who wanted this daughter, who loved her husband, who once believed in God, deeply, to tears, but then did not: all of this, inconsequential.

There was a problem. I saw the midwife and doula whispering on the bed. The bulging back, the head that would not descend. Years had passed since I drank the wine and slurped the celebratory mussels hours before, before I was afraid.

In the mirror above the sink I faced a different woman, an untamed mammal who mouthed in silence, Cut It Out. In the mirror I stopped thanking feminism, considering souls because what is important, in birth, is that we are animals, and animals rot on the forest floor, reproducing first, if we are lucky.

And how embarrassing, now, when women I meet at pizza parlors and big box stores discover I delivered at home and apologize for their births of needles and incisions and continuous fetal heart monitoring. I would not have volunteered my story to anyone. But they always ask—why?—Was she born at Marquette General?—and then they are so quick to say: Oh, I wanted a Natural Birth but I am forty, had gestational diabetes, he was footling breech, my doctor didn't think I had the strength to continue but I think I could have, but I just couldn't. But I just couldn't. I stammer to let her know I pass no judgment. The body gives out. I smile as if to say, I am sorry if you had health problems, or labored in conditions of disrespect, but the candle-lit ecstasy you are imagining for me

is a fiction, and I chose to stay home not because I was brave, but because more than pain I feared MRSA, C.diff, intravenous situations. And even with my midwife, my doula, my husband, my own mother in the kitchen making goddamned smoothies, the world of the birthing woman is a wild one, and whether the surgeon slices or the hippie midwife doused in lavender oil shoves both hands, past the wrists, where you never imagined they could go, and commands a somersault in the twenty-third hour, the mother's body is disrespected. Becoming the animal insults. In the mirror, braced against the wavering sink, looking at death in the dirty glass, it had not yet occurred to me that every one of us has gentle lovemaking and conjugal duty and teenage tryst and perhaps rape to thank for existence, somewhere down the line. And, of course, the woman who lost herself in the startling passage.

Wording

Multiple men my husband worked with told him to beware of postpartum depression. My mother-in-law, who'd sent me an article about PPD early on in my pregnancy, almost in the same breath as congratulations, was a victim of this cruel mental disorder long before the words "postpartum depression" were common, and memory of her silent misery made her dizzy with dread.

When the warnings began, I could not yet feel my baby's kicks, and my husband and I talked about what we could do to decrease the risks. We made plans to move into town, out of the suburbs, so I would not feel isolated after our baby's arrival. We negotiated future work and school schedules, and hired a doula to support us during the birth. We even asked her to dehydrate and encapsulate my placenta, based on untested, speculative suggestions that ingestion of these tissues would protect me too. As a happy woman who'd had bouts of gloom in college and just beyond, like everyone else, I was confident that we'd done all we could to ward off this disorder, and if not we'd have to worry about it later. Then I stopped thinking about postpartum depression completely and focused on baby names and crib mattress options.

Yet these men I barely knew, who did not know me, or my history, persisted with their bleak warnings. They never told my husband if their partners had been diagnosed, but they did use words like "moody" and "emotional." When my husband asked me, months into my pregnancy, months since we'd even broached the topic, if I would get postpartum depression, the question hurt. *But So-And-So told me his ex-wife cried a lot, and So-And-So said his girlfriend got demanding*, he'd say, and I had to scratch my head.

I wondered: Would I be emotional? Would I be overwhelmed that I was glued to the couch with a nursing baby while everything else—the laundry, the meals, the subtleties of where shoes were stacked, how bulk items in Ball jars were organized in the pantry—fell apart, because as much as we'd tried to avoid following normative gender roles, it had happened? Would I remember that my chaotic apartment was not only a home but my workplace come my baby's two-month birthday, and panic? Well, I would. Surely I would say some things I'd regret, also. After birthing a human, and then learning to feed it, and then preparing to go back to work to teach disinterested teenagers, would I be sensitive, would my moods swing? Would I criticize and cry when he came home late, or the when the wool went in the wash on hot, and then straight into the dryer on high, because he had not learned those lessons as a youth like I had? Would hormones surge through my body, and cause my hands to quiver, my words to catch, and my eyes to tear for reasons I could not understand?

Yes, of course, I realized, but ancient women protected their infants from tigers, and though the tigers are gone the workings of our bodies are the same. And now, every time my baby's little mouth meets my breast my posterior pituitary gland secretes a neurohypophysical hormone, oxytocin, which means that latch by latch I'm kicking ass because my bloodshot eyes are made bright again and I can face the day like I've had a full night of sleep when I've drunk only half a cup of coffee. My hormonal body is an orchestra with few mistakes, and any despair I've felt since birthing my baby pales in comparison to the difficulties of my lonely, jobless early twenties when I slept alone through a Denver winter in an uninsulated bedroom with an electric blanket that made my kidneys hurt.

I feel gratitude to the people who help me, and who love my daughter. I feel power and joy as I write this on the couch, as she nurses with abandon, as my husband texts asking if we need any ingredients for the dinner he will cook tonight. I love being a mother, and though it is hard, I am not crushed, and I am not crazy.

Neither are the mothers who have had a harder go of these tender early months, whose newborns gag and wail without end, whose breasts do not fill and release, whose partners do not learn, or whose bodies, mysteriously, play out of key. Postpartum depression, which is an actual diagnosable mental disorder with specific symptoms, affects more than ten percent of new mothers. These are women who are raw, numb wounds when it's time to go back to work. They weep in waiting rooms for well-baby checkups because they understand that they will not be able to answer correctly the pediatric nurse's routines questions, *Do you have more good days than bad? Are you sad more often than happy?*

When these men shuddered—again and again—at their own experiences before my apprehensive husband, I became angry. I believed they were saying that although they didn't know me, they didn't need to, because it was inevitable, because I was a woman—and women get hysterical—that having a baby would turn me into a monster of shrill insanity. And even though an overwhelming majority of new mothers—at least eighty-five percent—do not suffer from postpartum depression, they had these two magic words to throw around and hide behind.

But now, after watching my husband first fail, and then struggle, and then succeed, wildly, with all these responsibilities society never would have asked of him in

previous generations, I have changed my mind; perhaps I was putting words in their mouths.

I think what my husband's coworkers were actually talking about were themselves, and how scary it was to become a father, and how ill prepared they were for the task. I think they were telling my husband, *This will be so, so hard for you*, but they didn't have the language to say it right. They had no intent to harm me, or the mother who really did have her heart hollowed out and left for dead by postpartum depression, who truly did feel that her baby and lover and the taste of pie were all the same, all nothing, because life, for her, had become nothing.

No, these men meant only good, but language is important.

Pregnancy Rules from the Internet

Don't put that raw egg yolk in your smoothie, even if it is omega-3-fatty-acid rich, farm raised, cage free, and local, and you are hungrier than a pubescent athlete because you are growing a human in your uterus. Your fetus may contract salmonella. Same applies to the eggs benedict you've been dreaming about, the undercooked yolk and hollandaise dripping from your mouth, rolling off the nitrate ham into the absorbent biscuit.

Avoid unpasteurized milk, regardless of the way the half-gallon mason jars, boasting white cream lines, make you feel authentic and wholesome when they show up on your doorstep, planted in snow. The milk may carry *Listeria*, which though usually harmless, could hurt your baby.

Don't listen to those European luses. Put that glass down. It doesn't matter if many US studies on fetal alcohol syndrome involve mothers who are also using heroin. If you keep sipping your husband's beer, if you keep drinking tablespoons of wine from tiny whiskey cups on game night, it's all going to add up and only you will be to blame when your baby is stupid.

Skip the honey, because you can't boil out botulism. Studies indicate it would be unlikely for the botulinum toxin to be present, and to cross the placenta if it was, but you shouldn't risk it. Don't touch that fancy fresh sauerkraut either. If you're so concerned about your good gut flora, pick up some damn Yoplait from the corner store.

For the Love of God do not eat those three oysters. Yes, they are an excellent source of zinc, but also of noroviruses and numerous species of bacteria, which infect the

intestines and deplete electrolytes, which can be fatal. Isn't your unborn child worth more to you than getting your equal share of the appetizer?

Let the herbs alone, please. Maybe the raspberry leaf tea will tone your uterine lining, which could prevent hemorrhage during birth. Perhaps the Echinacea tincture could get your sniffles under control, keeping you from getting sicker. It's possible that the slippery elm bark, chewed and sucked, could be a safer and more effective remedy than Tums when your heartburn becomes unbearable. But these conjectures of healing are untested by the authorities that matter. More importantly, until studies have been published disproving these plants' potential for harm, you are taking your baby's life into your hands when you steep the leaves, squeeze the dropper, place the earthy fibers onto your tongue. And because not many scientists are conducting these experiments or writing up results, it's best to not mess around.

Following the above rules may improve your chances of birthing a full-term, live infant without major complications. However, major complications may still occur and forceps, vacuum suction, or a Cesarean Section may be unavoidable, and your baby may still become sick or die for unknown reasons. There's really no way to predict what will need to be done to your body to retrieve your child, and you shouldn't think too much about it because the odds are better than they've ever been. Be the container, but that is all. Put only approved items in your container body and prepare to be opened—cracked, crushed, torn, stretched, sliced—however necessary. And remember, as you lie in bed at night thinking over the rules you followed, the rules you broke, the microscopic organisms reckoning with your cells: the fetus inside of you—abstract as it is now—will

become your baby, one of the great loves of your life, and you will never forgive yourself if something goes wrong.

To Kara, After Our Births

Birth Class, Midwife's House

You were holding the beef dip you brought to the vegetarian potluck when I first met you, standing by the sink in your fluffy sweatshirt with the drawstring bow above your burgeoning belly. You told me you were from Iron River, eighteen, just married. Indignant, you explained that when your OB asked if you planned to keep the baby, you vowed never to see the abortionist again.

That we'd chosen the same homebirth midwife, Nancy, the only certified midwife in the Upper Peninsula, and were due the same month, was all we had in common, but I'd imagined meeting educated, organic-y women, like me, at the class. As you complained to me of your worried NICU nurse mother-in-law, I eyed the couple with whom my husband was chatting across the room. They had brought the appropriate chickpea-centric dish and were more what I had in mind. After I left you, I heard you retell your story to another girl, another small-town Evangelical, who was more receptive.

Though I avoided speaking to you again, I watched you through the meal, and I watched you when class resumed, when you slumped into Nancy's couch and sipped from your two liter, as she spoke of nutrition, exercise, and ideal fetal positioning. When I visualized your labor, I saw writhing, I saw shaking, un-muscled thighs, milky eyes, weakness, and I decided you were not the woman to be birthing at home. I watched you and I judged you from my stolid butterfly posture on the hardwood floor.

My Due Date, Your House

Before I saw you, I saw your people. Children and toddlers, the young mother with blonde dreadlocks and the wooden cross around her neck. They surrounded Nancy

as she leaned against her Subaru. Across the street, a crumbling brick church, people passing through its open doors. A seasoned, meaty smell in the air, a barking black dog tied up in your front yard, lunging. I saw the rotting porches rising from tuliped soils. I saw your neighbors on these porches, waiting, watching.

Like me, you probably qualified for a Medicaid hospital birth, but made a nonrefundable three-thousand-dollar bet to have your baby in your living room, unfettered by tubes and wires, clocks and rules. But while this package nearly guaranteed we'd be able to stay home for our labor and deliveries, it included extensive driving—three hours for me and one for you, in discomfort as the weeks progressed—to visit Nancy in her rural home on the Wisconsin border for our prenatal checkups. I also visited a doctor, who never asked me if I was sure, but did fill in the gaps—ultrasounds, a gestational diabetes test—of Nancy's folksy care. At the end I wanted to quit seeing Nancy because traveling from Marquette was physically painful, but she insisted. When she called on my due date, asking if I'd come to Iron River that afternoon, to your house, which was seventy miles closer to me, instead of her house two days later for my scheduled appointment, the choice was obvious.

In early labor, you had opened your home to me. I did not consider this generosity, or that the gesture was likely coerced, but I did question, as my husband drove and I rubbed my throbbing back, if choosing Nancy and all the hassle that came along with her had been wise after all. Would it have really been so bad to birth at the hospital, five minutes from my home? Was she worth it?

But Nancy was known here, it seemed. A visiting celebrity. As children in the street looked up to her in awe, it dawned on me that long before she had been popular in

my city, the only large town for hours, full of implants like me seeking “natural” birthing experiences, she’d been a staple in rural communities like yours, where women start young, where outsiders like me would assume birth control is seldom used, or even condoned, the mistrust of institutions rampant. I wasn’t sure why, but I felt fooled.

Congratulations, the young mother told me as I exited the car. Her nose ring glinted in the sun. She delivered all of my babies too, she said, sizing up my roundness. I wondered if she would be disappointed if she knew I wanted only one more child, if that. The woman’s smile was warm. For a moment I imagined a world where she could have been my friend, a world where I would have asked her questions about breastfeeding, and she would have taught me to knit tiny socks while listening to Christian folk music. Although I saw what you were up against, I think I also saw what made you stay before you ever had a chance to leave.

Nancy ushered my husband and me in to your house. When you read Nancy’s instructions for birth-readying your home, did you gasp? Did you stuff the checklist in a drawer and tell yourself you’d think about it later? Wasn’t there anyone you could’ve asked for help? What I saw in your living room bewildered me.

For weeks, I had been sterilizing towels and sheets by baking them on low in paper bags. I worried Nancy and my doula would get hungry if my labor was long, so poured protein-rich purees into popsicle molds, labeling them “vegan,” or “gluten-free,” to suit their dietary preferences. If my husband misplaced something, I scolded, and on non-vacuuming days, I lint rolled the couch. The birthing supplies—gloves, medical jelly, iodine sponges, extra-large sanitary napkins—were ready on the stand next to my

bed. Once, at thirty-nine weeks, we went to sleep with dirty dishes and I cried: what if I was caught unawares, and after all my hard work, had to labor in a pigsty?

I could have combed your carpet for treasures, except they would not have been treasures. Canned tobacco, empty soda bottles, fast food wrappers, DVDs, stray pieces of candy littered every surface. Your husband was at work while you groaned from the back of the house, while I sat on your couch, crumbs pricking through my jeans. Nancy only wanted me there to check vitals and measurements, but if she'd hoped for an internal exam I'd have flatly refused. My rage moved from you to Nancy: How could you be so dirty? And how could she let you?

When you emerged, your face was pink, and you looked tired, but not like a woman in labor. Nancy casually encouraged you to cross the street for the church's taco night. I think that's when I suspected the false alarm, and that it was more your terror than an imminent baby keeping Nancy in Iron River. I thanked you, and you kind of smiled, said "Yeah," and then slipped on a pair of drug-store soccer sandals and walked out the front door.

When I turned you away

My husband called Nancy four nights later, but she was driving to Iron River, because you were in labor, again. He went outside. I tried to listen, but then a stronger contraction hit me, and I buried my face into my pillow, muffling the shriek. When he came back he told me Nancy wanted you to come to our apartment, to labor and deliver alongside me.

I laughed. But my husband nodded yes. Nancy couldn't be two places at once.

I will always think your house was gross, and it will always feel bad that Nancy wanted us to birth our babies together in my small apartment, and that we were ever put in that situation. But it's not you who is to blame. You, despite the distaste you probably saw on my face, are not the problem. And neither is Nancy, with her insensitive remedies to logistical hiccups. We were those hiccups, because we wanted her, the only midwife within two hundred miles.

I had rejected what I saw as an over-medicalized birthing environment, and was skeptical because of a maternal death rate higher than most European countries, and some in Asia. Your first and only appointment with an OB left you feeling that, to the medical establishment, you and your precious baby were throw-away people. Nancy is stitching, I believe, the best patch she can in a gaping hole and made room for us both. I am still uncertain if homebirthing was responsible, or right, but I do believe Nancy created space where our hospitals would have cinched. In the hospital, my long and traumatic labor would have ended in surgery. In the hospital, they would have told you to go home, but you needed someone by your side because you were afraid, and needed someone by your side, to wait, and wait again, until it was time.

I did not see you that night, or the next, as my labor descended into nightmarish fog. I did not see you because I cried No. Don't let her in, I pleaded to my husband, to my doula, eventually to Nancy when she arrived hours later, after my contractions had progressed, and yours, I suppose, had not. What happened to you is still unclear, but I do remember hearing you came out to my city, though not to my doorstep looking for the extra room I wasn't offering. I also heard that you did not, that weekend, have your baby.

Your baby must be nearly four months now, but sometimes I think about you pregnant, calling Nancy to rub your back as you cry in that cluttered room, as your husband stocks boxes at work, as the church feeds the neighborhood, as your dog barks at the passing little girls who just want to get a glimpse of Nancy through the window. The mythical midwife gracing their neighborhood, the One who had pulled them from their mother's loins by the light of the moon, who will do the same for them someday.

Ten years earlier, it could have been you peering into those living rooms, imagining your own womanhood. It could have been you, watching Nancy work and wondering when this powerful woman would be rapt with attention to the rhythms of your body, and your body only. I don't think you ever envisioned traversing remote forest highways while contractions pummeled your middle, while you believed your baby was coming, only to find Nancy, who'd promised herself to you, shut away in an apartment where you were not allowed. In between rushes of pain, you must have checked your phone for messages containing my address, directions, or any signal that your labor, and your baby, were still important. And though this message never came, you told your young husband to keep driving, and when you made it as far as Negaunee and crested the hill, you sensed the lake's great darkness spread out behind my city's dense lights.

But What Will I Tell Her about God

And not just baby and crucified Jesus, or Lott's wife diminished to a pillar of salt because she dared to be human, but how can I explain to my daughter the God of my earnest adolescence who told me to pray for wisdom, and the God of my young adulthood who told me to give myself away.

When I prayed for wisdom, year after year, I learned it is wise to reexamine long held beliefs, to engage in a painful peeling away of what seems to be in search of what is. It became clear the earth was not ten thousand years old, and that nobody was burning in hell. Wisdom became a lesson in listening to scripture, first of biblical texts, but then to the literature since and the lives of the people around me, and I found varying narratives. These stories scratched up against each other, and against mine, and I had to wonder if God had ever told me anything to begin with. I didn't know what to think anymore, but walking away from the God I loved was impossible. As I crossed over from child to twenty-something, I prayed instead for wisdom in action, and I read the liberal theologians who weren't so caught up in the facts either, and did what felt right.

And based on my interpretation of the advice from these God experts, these older gentlemen with German surnames and tenured positions and tweed suits and command of multiple languages, what felt right was a poverty in body that I thought would mean wealth in spirit. I wanted to live like Jesus, and so promptly after graduating college I placed these things on a sacrificial altar: my ability to keep a job, my type-A personality, my aptitudes and talents, dentist appointments, routine oil changes, my resume, my savings account, shaving my legs, wearing mascara, my secret hopes of kissing boys I didn't really know, intact shoes, my future.

And then one day when I was cold, unemployed and miserable in an un-insulated room with a frozen glass of water by my bedside I thought about the way Simone Weil, whose writings I had misinterpreted, died young in probably preventable circumstances, and that I had spiritually inherited only her haircut and none of her bravery. This saddened me, all of it. It struck me that human lives were not meant to be thrown away, and most of us weren't actually living the paradoxes we'd drawn up in our minds, and if there was no hell, and no literal trinity, and if I was having to borrow money from my parents who voted in ways I did not like, then maybe it was problematic, even destructive to believe in such a God. I stopped believing, though I continued to pray for wisdom, and continued to desire to live a good life. And I still do, both of these things, but have learned to also take my cues from all those corners of human experience I had been denying.

In three years or so she's going to ask me about God. It will be a song her grandmother sings, or a preschool friend's comment at Christmas time, and I will have to say something. My falling away was hard won, and not without loss of potlucks and small groups, where we broke bread and discerned the whispers of the Holy Spirit, asserted for an hour our importance in the cosmos. And on cold winter Sundays my body aches for lovely hymns and stilted liturgies that though I think are misleading, are still important. They are important because they in part chronicle lives in pursuit of the big, the good, the holy, and as ugly a tale as that can be, and was, in many ways, for me, I can't imagine a version of myself apart from that sincere and incomplete journey. And because she is a baby, my baby, I still see her as a version of myself, as someone who

will breathe in God, just as I did, and then spend a decade and a half trying to get some fresh air.

So how will I be able to shake my head, and admit it, my disbelief? Though I cannot go backwards, daily I beg for a new way of seeing, or a church without creeds, or a way to say “the in-breaking kingdom of God” without saying “kingdom” or “God,” but what could any of this mean for her? Will I have anything better than a glib explanation for my wondrous, imaginative child, who teaches me so much, and who, in many ways, is an answer to long-ago prayers prayed to a God I no longer think exists?

Unspeakable, Unspeakable

SEPTEMBER

I learn I am pregnant the day I lock eyes with a young albino doe blocking the bike path, and I think about how I will need to stop drinking coffee and wine, and I think about hunting season.

OCTOBER

A family I know has lost their toddler daughter to a rare brain cancer she contracted before she could verbalize what a headache felt like, and on the Internet I scroll through pictures chronicling the little girl's decline. There was a point when they thought illness was only something that happened to other people's children.

NOVEMBER

I am wearing a cute pair of slick-bottomed boots when I walk out into the dark parking lot that has iced in the time I was inside, and as I crash to the asphalt, a friend screams. My midwife reassures me over the phone there's nothing to worry about unless I feel cramps or see blood.

DECEMBER

Winter's coming gloom drives me into the icicle-laden Episcopalian church one Sunday before Christmas, yet I hardly listen to the brief sermon because the stained glass window closest to where I sit is dedicated to five children, siblings. They all died in the same week in the late 1890's, and I wonder about tuberculosis, roofs collapsing under midnight

snow, ice skate blades slicing hardened lakes into watery gaps. I feel the ghost of a grieving mother sitting in this very pew.

JANUARY

One night when I should be studying I read an article about a brain-dead pregnant woman in Texas. She suffered an embolism, and the hospital kept her on life support in hopes her fetus could be viable. But the experiment is over, and two hopeless hearts have stopped beating. I stop, listen for clots hiding in my pulse, and wait for the tickling I've only recently felt in my swelling abdomen. The wind wracks the trees, and our roof creaks, and I am home alone.

FEBRUARY

Another toddler has cancer in her brain, but this time she's closer. My cousin's wife's niece's prognosis is good, but cancer prognoses never stay good, and I see a picture of her bald, and I feel the heat from my wheezing laptop that is resting on my middle. I could worry about this child or about radiation but instead I silently wish the little girl well, and snap the computer shut. I throw on my parka that no longer zips, and drive slick roads to the slicker trail to walk my dog along the frozen lake. I sing to my child as the wind numbs my nose.

MARCH

When my BabySafe™ crib mattress wrap, a fifty-dollar piece of plastic from New Zealand, arrives, the enclosed pamphlet cites a study alleging SIDS occurs more often in

single mother households. It deduces single mothers are poorer so use older mattresses, which release more toxic fumes, and thus off gassing mattresses are the culprits in SIDS. Though these somersaults in logic strike me as sexist and full of fallacy, still I am thankful for my husband, still I wrap my cheap but new Ikea crib mattress in the bulky plastic, still I gingerly smooth out the bunching wrinkles under the white sheet as I set up the crib and count down the weeks until I will see my baby in it.

APRIL

SIDS risk statistically diminishes after four months. A friend of a friend's six-month-old has just died in her sleep, and I scour the parents' social media accounts to prove to myself they did something wrong, like smoke or formula feed, or divorce. All I really learn is that fear turns me into an ugly and wrong person. I decide I will keep my baby in bed with me, where I can hear her breathe, and to not use the internet as a place to figure out other people's tragedies.

MAY

We bring dinner to a young friend who has been diagnosed with stage-four brain cancer. As we sit at his table laughing and eating and not looking at the scar on his head, we chat of my enormous belly, and the birthing of my baby that will begin any day, hour, or minute. We talk about this new life. We don't talk about the growth in his brain, or that he will probably never have children, or that after this spring he may not again experience the happy relief of melting snow. We also don't mention that he is somebody's baby, was once held safe in the great belly of an amazed mother.

JUNE

I plunge down from myself into a space where words and ideas don't really hold currency, a space of blood and groaning, where mortality makes a lot more sense, and I stay there for twenty-four almost-catastrophic hours. But then I come back up, and my baby comes with me, her left arm stretching over her head, her eyes wide. A new life wails and we are all one day closer to what we do not know.

Reading Books to Babies

I. Love

I read my daughter *Goodnight Moon* on the first evening of her life. I needed a way to tell her I loved her. The words available to me were not enough, and it not had yet registered I didn't need words. What I found in the great green room—the telephone, the red balloon, the picture of—was also not enough, but closer.

Margaret Wise Brown is a picture of handsome glamour on the back of our HarperTrophy paperback. Eight numbers and a dash tell me her life was too short. A student of writing and education, a lover of men and women, she moved about artist crowds in postwar France until a surprise clot cut her down, travelling from leg to lung, where it became fatal. She was only forty-two and childless. Yet I think this kind of description reduces her, misses the point. Though initially this string of facts stuck out to me, new with the child I had craved for so long, it doesn't matter: the sex she had, the babies it didn't produce. What I mean to say is she was an artist, and the one with the right words for my baby when I had none. That's the thing about artists, they know what to whisper when the rest of us are clueless, slack jawed. A sort of scripture, they give.

My baby probably couldn't see any pictures, but Wise Brown's simple words, from my mouth, calmed her. I could feel it in her tiny body, as we reclined on the couch. I turned the page, read, "the cow jumping over the moon."

Expressing love to a baby requires more than an *I love you*. Like romantic love, it is worked out in a vocabulary of the body, but where sex heightens our senses and makes

us alert and strong and hot, holding a newborn, adjusting her latch, encouraging her to suckle for comfort and colostrum, is this one-sided act where the actor becomes flattened, if there was anything left to flatten after the birth. And then there's all this emotion, but the baby doesn't care as long as there are arms and nipples, warmth and dark. There is almost eye contact, maybe. When the *I love you's* are said, nothing. Just piglet noises, an ever rooting mouth.

And so for us, in those early moments, it was the poetry of bears on chairs, kittens and mittens, the toy house, the mouse, and a comb, a brush, some neglected mush, and the hush of the old lady rabbit in her creaking rocking chair. It was the thingy mess my baby could not yet even see. It was the world that had been waiting for her to be alive. She grasped my pinky finger and I had to remind myself that this touch was my life now.

II. Prayer

"Goodnight room," I told my child on that first goodnight of her life. This was a time, though filled with happy wonder, of fear. What if I rolled over onto her in my sleep? What if my tailbone was broken? What if she had a heart defect the ultrasound had not caught? Or what if I had the unlikely but possible late postpartum hemorrhage, and bled out with no warning? But "Goodnight moon," I continued, because I had to. "Goodnight cow jumping over the moon," because I had to show her, despite the trauma we had just survived, the terror I was barely keeping at bay, that we nightly give our salutations to the moon, we give ourselves quietly to the night, to sleep, and most times find we can start all over again in the morning.

Literature for the very young usually takes one of two paths. Either a story about anything—zoos, birthday parties, snow, counting—ends with the main character peacefully putting on pajamas and snuggling into bed for a night of easy rest. Or, the book is all about, and only about, bedtime and its rituals. So persistent is this theme, and so needy for sleep are the parents who read these books, that the genre has also long been a joke. Look at the violence of the ancient lullaby *Rock-a-by Baby—down will come cradle, baby and all*—or more recently, Adam Mansbach’s satirical goodnight story *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, most effective when read by Samuel L. Jackson on the book’s audio version.

But I don’t think it’s merely parental fatigue fueling the reading and writing of bedtime stories, because while bedtime is no dark night of the soul, it is dark. The sun dips down and the baby cries, and there is space in the night for dread. We humans are afraid of the dark, after all, and with a new baby, there are countless more nightmares to behold. 2,500—and that’s a modest estimate—infants will die in their sleep this year, just because. How many more will suffocate under unwisely placed pillows, or succumb to viruses, I don’t want to know, but I do know saying goodnight holds weight. We need it to be good. A precious and vulnerable life depends on it.

My baby slept after six pages but I read on anyway. I ticked my way through the goodnights to light, to clocks and socks, to the comb and brush, and to nobody, and then to the mush. The nobody page is blank. In those first twenty-four hours of parenthood, that image of nothingness caught in my throat.

Scant research could not tell me when, and how, Margaret Wise Brown faced her soul's darkest nights, or if she believed in souls. Yet I do know *Goodnight Moon* was published in proximity to pain: five years before she died, three years before she lost her longtime lover, and two years after the end of the war that cost over sixty million lives.

In those years leading up to *Goodnight Moon*, countless parents across Eurasia tucked their children into bed against a backdrop of sirens and explosions, not knowing if their apartments would stand come morning, if their hearts would still beat when the sun rose again. And often, they didn't.

Still, these exhausted families must have settled into their evenings with rituals, stories, and lullabies just the same, and it's hard to imagine Margaret Wise Brown didn't consider these routine, but desperate, pleas for a good night as she wrote her children's masterpiece. I like to think she included addresses to the stars and the air, and to the noises—ominous as rockets, sacred as the fragile rustlings of a congested baby's breath—everywhere, with these people in mind. The inexplicable bigness of their love for their children against the truth of existence: that in the vast starry universe, they were tiny, invisible. Worthy of a love poem, but nobody.

PART TWO

Perigee

The beauty catches in my throat as we pull onto the road to Asher and Moira's farm, my husband beside me and our daughter in the backseat. It's thirty minutes from our home in town, but we have not visited in months. Asher's zinnias and onions, ripening pumpkins, and Moira's pecking hens in a meadow of goldenrod meet us on the narrow dirt road up to the old farmhouse. I comment on the beauty, but Toby is silent and seems to merely log away my words. I imagine he has little hanging files in his brain: 'For Revenge' or 'For Justification' or 'To Precede Make-Up Sex.'

I used to have my own land, a quaint and crumbling farmhouse and vegetable business close to here. When Toby married me, I told him my property was part of the deal.

But that ended five years ago. After the icy ambulance ride and emergency caesarian section, six weeks early, after Penelope's colicky cries and my postpartum depression, and after the discovery of lead paint all over the walls and in the plumbing. We sold the place and decided I would be a stay-at-home mom.

Penelope, hearing the word 'throat,' makes exaggerated choking noises and bursts into giggles. Before I pull the keys out of the ignition, Penelope unbuckles herself from her complicated harness and is out, squealing with Asher and Moira's girl, Bess, and chasing their tabby mouser through the remains of the potato patch. The earth compacts under their pink shoes.

“Have we decided who’s on kid duty?” Toby says, his finger poised over the seatbelt buckle. I’m already halfway out of the car.

“I’m not sure we need to do that.”

“I’d really feel more comfortable if—”

“They’re not babies. We’re all watching them.”

“What if I’m on duty the first half? Or we could split it with Moira and Asher. Except that I wouldn’t want Asher on kid duty alone. So maybe we better keep this between the two of us.

I sigh, “Sure, whatever,” and Toby clicks the lock button.

Asher is leaning against a tree near, but not quite with, the other adults on the lawn. He’s not holding a glass, but wears what Toby calls his ‘dog face.’ Wordless, with a kind of lolling slackness. He is drunk, which is not good, even if it is birthday.

Toby squeezes my elbow. He can tell too, and a perverse joy surges in me. It might be the drama that accompanies relapse, or how my husband and I are for once seeing with the same eyes, or that he’s touching my bare skin in the open air. I slip my hand into his. He lets go promptly, speeds over to the cheese board set up on the front porch.

When I offer up my slaw to Moira, she grins, clutching her rough clay mug. It is twin to the one I have brought—and always bring to her house—except in color and subtle depressions, from that ceramics class we took together when we were both twenty-eight and pregnant. I pat my purse, gently, checking that my own mug is there.

“It looks great out here,” I say.

Moira beams, says, “Hasn’t Asher done well? Did you see the pumpkin patch? Isn’t it lovely?”

I nod.

All this past summer, Moira, has come to my house for lunch on Fridays, and our daughters play in the yard. Lately, she has been telling me how bad Asher is, and that she’s close to leaving him.

In her laments, she has often used the word “husband,” like Asher isn’t my old friend. Like she’s forgotten how I knew him first, as a farmer, how I set them up and watched their romance unfold. Once, I mentioned that Toby was becoming predictable, routine-oriented in a way that didn’t quite seem normal, and she rolled her eyes. Because *at least* he’s stable, with a lucrative career and the ability to vacuum or separate laundry or change the oil without being asked. He bakes exactly one egg casserole each Sunday and often sweeps the garage and has never overdrafted our account or driven a car into a ditch piss drunk.

Last week she told me she was really going to do it. “So do it!” I’d snapped, surprising even myself. I tried to contact her after the weekend, and then a few days after that, but silence. And then this morning she called me to cancel on our lunch and invite us out to Asher’s last-minute party. Her voice felt tight and censored over the phone. I agreed to come, and she seemed to relax. But Toby doesn’t like spontaneous plans after work, especially when they involve a change of clothing. The disruption can throw him off balance for days. All afternoon I was on edge.

Now, Moira raises her mug in cheers and I see red wine. “Tonight, we drink,” she says, smiling wider.

Oh, my relief, how visceral it is. I just want to let go. The happy shrug of my shoulders, the audible sigh, the ease in which I put down the bowl of cabbage and dig the mug from my purse, blow out the dust, and as I meet Moira's gaze, lift it up to the level of our hearts. The soul mates make contact, and their clinking is a joyful sound.

Two hours pass. It's a pleasant time, adults relaxing in the country, little girls having their adventures.

Inside there is new wine, and my cup is empty. Asher is gone. His lawn chair in the circle around our meager fire still looks indented, as if straining under a great weight. But Asher is so thin, this summer more than others. Some of the chair's plastic tubing has snapped, giving it a disheveled fringe of green and yellow.

Outside the circle, in the dappled glow of the rising super moon, Moira stands, one hand resting on the back of a chair taken from their kitchen, a straight-backed wooden chair with a velvet cushion. She isn't looking for Asher—she is beyond that now, I suppose—but talking, laughing, sipping often from her mug.

Moira jerks when the sweet shrills of our children's voices rip through the air. Over by the hoop house, in the sandbox, there is a brief squabble about a yellow bucket. But a childless friend waves for us to stay put and sets off over to them. I smile in gratitude. Moira returns to her conversation. She looks beautiful.

Behind Moira, a card table holds Asher's cake, the '3' candle upright, the '8' sinking into frosting. Beyond that my gaze takes in the leaning woodshed, a hill of collapsed scooters and tricycles, bikes and other rusting garage sale toys, and a chainsaw, tilting on a log.

In the kitchen the cork lies broken and stained next to the half-empty green bottle. A few gnats flit about and I shoo them away, pour myself more wine. An open bucket of food scraps stinks up the counter.

Out front, someone nails a punchline and the small crowd roars. I hear something behind the house, and move towards the noise. I see through a window that Asher is working on the back porch. The light is dim and I bring him a lantern. He is processing onions, at his own party. For a minute I watch him. These bulbs are wet and tender, weeks too young for the tunics they need to survive fall and winter in a root cellar or a pantry's dark bottom cupboard. Their stalks still a shocking green, yet also crisp and hardening. Far too old to be scallions or spring onions. Market is in the morning, the tomatoes are unripe, and they need money now.

"You shouldn't be drinking," I say, as I bend down for an armful of muddy onions. I think of our large backyard garden. Toby built me beautiful raised beds and a deer fence of birch and wire, and I taught him about gardening: a truce when we moved into town. I pick over the plants each day when I am home alone with Penelope.

"You shouldn't be snooping," Asher says warmly, and he doesn't seem drunk, not like he did earlier in the night. There is a lot of wine in his mason jar.

He yields a knife that was once very sharp. I remember it was given to them by an older acquaintance who is now dead, when Asher and Moira bought their land. She had unwrapped and removed it from its embroidered leather sleeve while he held the baby, and as he beamed I saw her suppress a shudder, the exposed blade resting across her upturned palms.

In those days there were more trees around the house, and they wracked the windows as the late spring rainstorm descended. I sat in the back of their unfinished parlor nursing infant Penelope to sleep, again and again, both of us startling every time branch met glass.

With each uneven hack, more flowering heads and their green necks shoot across the table. What is left oozes pungent slime. I shake my head. “This is silly,” I say, feeling my buzz.

“Needs to be done.”

And so I nudge Asher over to the sink side of his processing station, and grab the knife. He doesn’t flinch from my hand on his spine. I dump my onions in the sink, line up the wounded bulbs again, and cut them clean. He stares though the window into the house as I place the finished product in the big red ice chest that rests beside me on the porch’s slatted floor.

Asher is an easy drunk, until he’s not, and after a time he can’t keep up with me. I take a long drink of my wine while I wait for him and look at his slender hands, the skin rich with pigment and creases brimming dirt. It’s surprising how the porous cup against my lips reminds me of kissing his knuckles, which I have never done, which I have not thought about doing for several years. There was a season when this yearning consumed me and it all rode on silly things, like, say, waiting to be the last one still awake with him around a campfire. I never was. But here I am now, wondering what exactly I’m doing.

Toby is not wondering where I am. I know this in a deep place because, after eight years of marriage, what a spouse understands best is how she is forgotten.

Processing onions with Asher is enjoyable—almost religiously satisfying. The wrongs of the world lose their edge. There’s the wet onions’ shine, and then the way I brush the harvest’s leavings off the table to make room for what’s arriving, the acoustics of hollow stems hitting the wood. Cycles ending and beginning. Some pieces fall four feet through floorboards to the moist earth below, where a rabbit might find them later, a spicy midnight snack. Asher pulls the last bunch from the basket. I don’t want it to be over.

“You’re perfect for this,” he says.

I shrug.

“What if you came out here and worked for me, Lara, when Penelope starts kindergarten? I need a business partner,”

“Moira,” I say, a reflex.

His hands lazy in the filling sink, until they cease scrubbing. The onions plug up the basin and he does not turn off the water. I watch the steady tap, willing him to be better. And also willing us to do something crazy. Asher’s breathing is labored. After a time, he looks hard at me.

“Moira what?”

A small noise escapes my mouth, but I don’t know if I’ve in- or exhaled or neither. For a moment the world takes on a radiance, full of possibility. The sun has been gone for a long time now, giving yielding the stage to the super moon, which Asher and I can’t see from where we stand. Our bodies are nearer than they’ve ever been.

In the distance, I can hear Toby’s muffled voice and I imagine he’s explaining to our friends that it’s called a *perigee*. That this month’s super moon isn’t a real perigee

because it won't be its closest to the earth until late tomorrow morning, hours after the sun has once again robbed it of its brilliance. I dart out my hand, hammer down the faucet.

"She must be furious," I reply.

Asher smiles. This is both what I mean and yet not what I want to say. But then his stubbled lips widen and there's laughter and I can smell all the things Moira has been smelling for years, and I hate it.

A rustling over the first felled leaves. I drop the knife; it hits the ground. When I stoop to pick it up, I see Moira's face flash from relief—Asher is not passed out somewhere in the house or garden—to what isn't quite betrayal or jealousy but more of a surprise with delicate hints of both, like a finish on a wine, the accents of coffee beans.

"I was just helping him process," I blurt out. My tongue is laden with booze.

Moira glares at Asher.

"The onions," I mumble.

"Hey baby," Asher slobbers in a bad mock Southern drawl.

"Don't you want us to light your candles and sing to you?" Moira glances at me while talking to him. He is failing by the second: giggling, farting, and then giggling harder.

"Baby, do I need cheering on because I'm one year closer to being dead?"

"Just please, let's get this cake thing over," Moira says.

"Easy for you to say, youngin'," Asher scoffs. He turns his body towards mine, gives me a rough rub on the shoulder, and practically shouts, "You too!"

Youngin' sounds wet and soiled in Asher's mouth. I wiggle from his touch and look to Moira, contorting my face in a way that says, *yes, I know this is bad*. That says, *I could not leave him alone*. Not with the knife, not with his harvest, not with himself. Moira drops her shoulders, and I notice shadows around her eyes, and we are all quite drunk.

Then, more patiently, she croons, "Come on, Asher, hurry up. I didn't bake you a German chocolate cake from scratch to feed to the raccoons. And the super moon is out!"

Back at the circle, the false perigee really is impressive. Toby neither greets me nor looks suspicious. Our daughter is close by, narrating a game of princess-warrior-unicorn with Bess.

Everyone pretends to ignore Asher's slovenliness. I see some pity or exasperation in a few of our friends' glances at Moira. But nobody else looks at Asher. He's back in his lawn chair with his ass at the edge, his wide angular shoulders swaying. Moira wants him over by the cake and he trips twice during the ten-foot walk. The whisper yelling begins. We all keep sipping like college students on wine in mugs and mason jars, on cheap beer in cans, on whiskey in water tumblers.

It's not until Asher is sunk back into his lawn chair with a sheepish smile like he's shit his pants and Moira is wobbling over with the cake in her hands that I realize Penelope is gone.

"Where are the kids?"

Moira pauses, looks around. "Oh," she stammers. It's as if the questions surprises her, and then built into her sudden worry is the embarrassment of being the drunken mother of a young child.

We both look to Toby.

Another friend answers, “They were just here, right?”

Toby shrugs. “Weren’t you on duty?” he asks me, and there’s a quality about the easy bunch and release of his shoulders that makes me want to destroy him. The rage rushes into me.

“God, Toby. It’s dark out.” I’m trying to find a way to accuse him.

“You were on duty, Lara, we agreed,” he lectures me as I look towards the hoop house, the porch, the black fields.

I want to kick him in the face. Instead, I start walking to the garden and look back at him to yell, “What the fuck kind of parenting is that? Are you drunk?”

The smug way Toby shakes his head no makes me know he’s telling the truth. Then I hear Penelope scream. Her voice is coming from the direction of the road.

I run and run and run, I need my little baby in my arms, safe, and if I can’t have that I’m leaving Toby, I’ll leave him. Dirt turns to gravel, and the road is blank. No cars, no bodies. “I’m here!” I scream.

Behind me, noise. I’ve passed them somehow. Moira is ten feet back, holding Penelope in the trellised berries. At first I can’t move. My daughter calls for me, but I’m stuck working down the wine, remembering how to breathe. When I take the first step, Toby is already there. He scoops her up, and Moira lifts her own daughter who has been weeping quietly with fear, tugging her mother’s skirt.

Toby shines the light from his phone on our child’s face. I register there is some blood, her hand over her left eye, and sandwiched in between a dried and spindling

thorny branch dangling with dead tiny beginnings of blackberries. I look under her hand. The cut doesn't look that bad.

But Toby has a thing about eyeballs. He tells me to get the car. I do as he says, though a great calm has put its foot smack in the middle of my madness. Our daughter—my life—is not dead or dying, not even close. I'm not worried. This is what sometimes happens to children in the country, small risks sometimes end in a little blood, and this lesson may be as important as gathering acorns and earthworms and plucking ripe fruit from vines. As I jog to my purse and jostle it for the keys, Toby says something about Penelope losing her sight, which is absurd. What a strange evening. I start the car. Their faces, so close together in the flora, are the picture in my mind and then the image in the headlights. I realize for the first time, in anguish, that my husband and child look just alike.

In the ER it's what I guessed: a cut, a week with a patch, some drops, no long-term damage expected. Penelope has calmed down with pain meds. I've been chugging what tastes like toilet water in a collapsing waxy paper cup and munching vending machine almonds to restore my faculties. Asher and Moira's drama is a dim memory, an episode separate from my life and concerns. Toby is rattled, though.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," I tell him while rubbing his back. He's tense, and ignores me. "I should've been watching her. I shouldn't have left the fire for so long."

"Did I ever tell you about my friend with the glass eye?"

"Toby," I say, motioning to Penelope, who is beside us in her hospital bed, fielding the nurse's questions about starting kindergarten.

“He snagged it on a rose bush. Ripped the whole ball out of the socket.”

“Don’t think about that. It was a freak accident. She’s fine.”

“She might have not been fine,” he says.

“And I shouldn’t have exploded like that. You’re right, we made a plan.”

“The image of the empty socket, I can just imagine.”

Then Toby gags. I put my head in my hands.

“Is he—?” says the nurse. I mutter that everything is fine.

Penelope starts whining. The problem is that she didn’t get cake and ice cream.

This escalates into wailing, “I want it! I need it!”

The nurse makes the predictable, but kind, remark about how tantrums are a sign things are getting back to normal. I try to smile.

But Toby cuts in, “No you don’t. Remember, you don’t like German chocolate cake?”

“Cake,” she sniffles, pausing to consider his claim. “Cay-ay-ayyye”—the crying continues—“aaaayyyyyyyyyyke.”

I run my fingers through her hair and soothe. “I know, sweet girl, let’s get you some tomorrow. It’ll be your special treat after lunch.”

She looks at Toby, then to me, and says, “But I need it to be germinating chocolate cake.”

I nod and Toby shakes his head. “No, no, no Penelope, I’m telling you, you won’t like it.” His voice is firm and grows louder against Penelope’s whimpers. “And then you’re going to cry because you want some other cake. German chocolate is way too bitter for you.”

“No I need germing!”

“Sweetie, we can try it.”

“This is a mistake, Lara. This is why she’s manipulative. Don’t give in.”

“Mommy, I don’t like Daddy!”

“Every tantrum we don’t deal with she’s learning that she’s in control. We can’t let up our vigilance, Lara. We *must* follow through *every single time*.”

“Oh please Toby, she had such a scare.”

“Yeah and who’s to blame for that scare? You were on duty. And who’s going to give in with the cake? Are you seeing any patterns yet? Are you going to buy her ice cream when she fails her classes, or drugs when she loses her first job?”

“I want,” Penelope heaves, sucking in breath, “GERM ING,” and then breaks into a coughing fit which seems to make her eye hurt all over again. She’s unhinged. Toby is listing the reasons my disciplinary philosophy is wrong all the way down to my body language. I’m saying something about buying two kinds of cakes, German chocolate and a safe flavor, when I notice the nurse, sitting at the computer, staring at us.

What her face communicates: *He’s insane*. I see Toby catch her eye, too.

“I forbid German chocolate cake,” Toby has declared, the last word.

I blink back at the nurse, and then I feel like my skin is sinking into my bones.

“Hey,” she says, popping up, “I think this little angel needs her beauty sleep tonight, okay? So we need to keep nice and calm so that the doctor can take one more good look at that eye and you can all go home, yeah?”

Early in the morning, Penelope crawls into bed with us. Toby doesn't stir while our daughter grunts and whinnies.

"I want germing cake." Penelope pulls the covers up to her shoulders, and around her eye patch the skin doesn't look too bad. "I need it to feel better," she adds, yawning.

I whisper, "Later, soon," and stroke her cheek until she sleeps. The two of them are peaceful, and Toby, without waking, snuggles into Penelope's tiny body. I attempt to join my family in slumber. When I can't, I rise and dress, brew a pot of coffee, feed the cat, and try to finish an overdue novel. But I quit the book, lost in thought about what if my morning routine again involved lacing up work boots, unlatching the chicken coop and scattering feed, checking on the pole beans that have overnight grown from delicate slivers to fat starchy fingers.

At nine the supermarket bakery is open, and I set out on bicycle to buy Penelope a piece of cake.

In the grocery store I cross my arms over my chest, shivering in the violent air conditioning as I examine the plastic clamshells. There is no German chocolate. There is nothing that looks appetizing. One fudgy wedge catches my eye. The label and its dozens of laboratory ingredients repel me. I can make a cake, chocolate with some coconut flakes on top, and call it good. Everyone will be happy.

As I mount my bicycle, the urge for German chocolate becomes stronger. I *will* bring some home.

The town's other bakery is too far for biking. Only a few blocks out of the way there is the farmers market, full of entrepreneurial bakers selling their goods in compostable boxes with warning stickers, *This was made in a home kitchen*. Usually I

avoid the scene, but today I take a left instead of the right that would lead me back home. The market is a rainbow of vegetables and fruits, and of strong women and men standing behind booths in tatty clothing, with soil under their fingernails, with muscles and tans. I used to be one of them. My friends and acquaintances on either side of these booths swarm the market. Now I have all the money I need, but I've never found my place among the happy shoppers buying small heirloom potatoes five at a time, in the transaction eagerly touching the blessed hand of the farmer who dug them from the dirt.

The first two vendors offer me toothpicked samples of cardamom buns and almond paste scones, but have no German chocolate cake. I must venture to the market's interior. My eyes don't waver. I take up Penelope's desperate and singular focus on cake, cake, *caaayyyke*.

"Lara, Lara, Lara!"

Moira.

Slowly, I turn. No Asher. She's waving me over, big beaded earrings dangling in the morning bright. Market's not half over and her produce is already running out. Remaining are a handful of green peppers, a few bags of hardy salad greens in ice, two baskets of raspberries, and three bunches of onions. They have done well today.

"Hey girl," she says. She's wearing the same thing as the night before. "I can't believe you're here! How's your babe?"

"Asleep with Toby. She'll be fine." I explain the injury and simple treatment plan, and Moira listens, pausing here and there to greet customers who might buy some greens or meander on to a fuller stand.

She lowers her voice, and asks, "And how are you?"

“What do you mean?”

She pauses, like she’s searching for words. “That must have shaken you up, being way out in the country with an emergency. You know, reliving all that trauma.”

“Oh,” I say. I hadn’t even considered Penelope’s birth. The topic feels unnatural, actually. I have a sense Moira means something else, too. “I guess it never crossed my mind.”

“Wow! Way to go, girl. That’s awesome,” Moira congratulates me, tilting her head in a funny way. I can see that she’s looking for hurt, and—this is the disconcerting part—wants it. Another customer, set on making the perfect enchiladas using only local ingredients, draws her attention away. I almost leave, but my confusion keeps me there.

Moira turns back to me, all warmth again. Maybe it was my imagination. She hands me a bunch of onions.

“Here, you deserve these.”

“No, sell them. We’ve got plenty at home.”

“Lara, come on. You helped. And we’ve been a hit today. We exceeded our goals, even though I hiked up the prices. So savor these, please—the flavor is so delicate. And Asher appreciates your help.” Her smile widens as I reach for the bulbs.

“And how...?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. In bed, you know,” Moira says, softly now, biting her lip.

“And you’re staying?”

“Yep, yeah, for now, yes.”

I tell her I’m sorry, because I don’t know what else to say. I want to ask who brought the booze. Or why we all gave in so easily. But she shakes her head, shushes me.

“It’s a process, you know,” she says, waving her hands. “I’d planned to cover his birthday market, anyway, before. Let’s blame the super moon. Can we? I mean, he was doing so well. He really was. A normal full moon is bad enough. But that. It must have messed with his inner currents so much. I mean, I felt it, and I’m not even a—you know. I mean, it was a mistake. But it’s over now. The super moon is done and gone and we’re just going to keep going because what else can we do, you know?”

“Mmm.”

Moira nods. Then she narrows her eyes, and asks me, “So what are you doing here?”

I laugh. “Penelope wants cake. Germinating chocolate cake. The grocery store didn’t have any. I’m on the hunt. So far, no luck.”

“Oh my god I almost forgot,” Moira exclaims, throwing up her arms and spinning around. She bends down to an ice chest behind her booth and removes three plastic baggies. In each is a piece of her cake, a little flattened.

“I figured I better save these for you guys. I’d planned to drop them off after market but…” and she holds out the bags in what feels like a grateful gesture.

“But here I am.”

“And I’m so glad.” says Moira.

I receive the cake. Our fingers make pronounced contact. She’s not lowering her eyes. Something is between us.

I remember my mug and ask her about it.

“Oh,’ she says, holding her gaze. The smile remains but as a shell. “It broke. I don’t know how it happened. Sorry.” Moira looks away, greets a person who has come up on my right, unnoticed, and asks about the variety of the onions.

“No worries,” I mouth to her, shrugging. A coldness sweeps through my gut, up into my spine, landing in my chin, which quivers. I back away, telling Moira, who is busy, that I have to leave, and good luck, and thank you. My arms are heavy with her gifts. Through the frenetic crowd I see my bicycle, a fixed point, leaning against a tree.

PART THREE

THIS IS NOT OUR REVOLUTION

PART I

Chapter One: To Edgar

Your mother, Brandy, quit college to start a farm in the far north woods with all of us. When she came to stay, the Twin Towers had just come down, and our retreat into the forest seemed the right thing to do. We were so young then, little radicals, and we didn't want children or real jobs or marriages or capitalism or conscription or oil or guilt. The urban anarchism we'd been pretending to practice exhausted us, though, and we yearned for space. We thought we needed it to be real humans. And thanks to good parental connections, we got a rent-to-own deal on a drafty farmhouse and twenty acres.

Above the couch, your mother taped a poster of a curling iron, crossed out in red ink made to look like dripping blood. Next to it, she hung drying flowers from crooked nails. We watched her do this, and stepped back and smiled, because we hadn't realized the previous blankness of that space on the white wall. She smiled too.

Brandy liked to bathe outside when the weather was warm, which it wasn't, often. We had rigged up a solar-heated shower behind a south-facing toolshed, and on one late afternoon she stood under the fleeting hot water. The uneven stream massaged the places on her body—knees, shoulder blades, buttocks—that were sore in new and wonderful ways. Her life now was bending into snap peas and over prolific summer squash plants to cull a third of their floppy golden blooms.

In the shower, your mother watched the water turn crusted dirt to mud. It ran from her neck over her breasts and belly, off her hips and thighs. What did not liquefy stayed put. Brandy never scrubbed, and from her shower she emerged not dirty but wearing a new layer, not quite skin, not quite earth, if the two could be separated.

Standing naked on the grass in the cooling open air, she licked a part of her forearm that looked as if it was turning to clay. How did a farm woman taste? Salt, of course, but also there was something bitter in there with the savory, in the way of a hard purple cheese rind. The after taste: sweet, fade into burn. Like all of us at that time, your mother fancied this flavor of herself, and felt very happy.

At the start of our third winter, when your mother was twenty-four, she walked down the road on a warm day to a clean ditch and broke the thin ice with a hammer. The cattail rhizomes were difficult to dig out of the frozen earth, and later the peeling and processing of the starchiest parts gave her pause.

Yet Brandy believed that nothing came easy to her, and at least the cattails had just been there, as if waiting for her to take them. She'd already bled under the nails making the acorn meal, and she'd found a good recipe on a survivalist website for cattail

acorn bread. As she worked she had a new thought, and it felt sexy, that making use of what was in front of her—and nothing more—beat out all the adolescent agonizing and trivial choice-making of her past.

Nine hours combined. After, she had more than two loaves of bread and half a cup of fried cattail corms, which we eyed warily, then ate greedily. Your mother had, she said, a profound new connection to the earth. She sparkled, and forked modest second helpings onto our plates.

We loved her then, and all she brought to our farm each day, offerings we didn't know we'd been missing.

Our chins were greasy. As a blizzard came down and then broke our trees and our spirits, Brandy said, Sure, our fat vegetables are easier, but the trick is we have to grow them.

Spring came, a miracle always. A neighboring farmer taught us how to tap maple trees and make syrup. We didn't get far, and mostly, we drank sweet water spiked with vodka. Planted for summer, and worked our jobs in town, earning the cash we needed, most of us.

We lived in the country, but we were not yet real farmers. We couldn't say it aloud. Instead, we were the waitresses being cheated on our tips, the co-op cashiers ringing up glass jars of yogurt and vegan hot dogs, the young men climbing on roofs to right what winter snows had wronged. We were the part-time nannies to the children of well-off liberals, the kind of parents who didn't mind our tattoos or nose rings or dirty

stringy hair, and liked to reminisce about when they were young and carefree. Always the subtext: you will change. We smiled and nodded and didn't believe a word of it.

We were the after-school-program coordinators employed by grant-chasing nonprofits that couldn't always pay on time. We were the flower planters out on the highway where it ran through town, insanely inserting and removing impatiens, petunias, pelargonium from the filthy soil in the narrow median between the whizzing tourists' cars.

Your mother, she tried on these roles too, but she suffered like she had in school, from the disconnect between action and intention. So we gave it time. And we carried on as usual, poor and beautiful, resourceful, lusty.

It was also a spring of cattail shoots, then morels, fiddleheads, ramps. Brandy led the way through trails of slush and virgin green. She was at her best while foraging, which she told us was called 'wild crafting' for those in the know. The world was a gift, one just had to take it, she said. Looking back, that was a strange way to think about gifts—she never said how she would show thanks—but we were naïve and saw ourselves as the beginning, middle and end of the land around us even if we should have known better, even if we did.

Your mother put in her time with us, too, prepping the garden, feeding the hens. We had a little stage for a while, and she helped book shows for the summer, when life would come back and the townspeople would drive to our farm. They would wear plaid and beam admiration for what we were doing and we would be okay. This promise satisfied us, but Brandy was restless. The relentless snows after we thought winter over surprised her, crushed her. The gray ate her.

She hosted an angst-filled stitching group, but it fizzled out, and then she held a new class called Positive Wo-Myn-Stration where she taught other young women, mostly town girls who worked in coffee shops while attending their sixth or seventh year of university courses, to sew menstrual pads out of recycled flannel. She lectured about the dangers of hormonal contraceptives, and how the pill depleted zinc reserves, and showed them graphs and charts for tracking their own cycles with the moon as reliable birth control. These meetings unraveled to wine and gossip, tales of seduction. One girl gushed for an hour on a sex toy, little beads at which the others' mouths gaped. Most attendees stayed on the pill, despite Brandy's warnings. Your mother felt defeated—why wouldn't they believe her?

At the last class: Does anyone even care what it means to be human?

As she chewed on a potato one evening, under the lamp with one burned-out bulb, your mother said, No more of these roots and tubers. They're leeching parts of me I didn't know I had but I don't think I can live without.

We were there, next to her on the couch, or sitting on the cold wood floor. For months our table and chairs had been covered in all the winter squash we could not eat or sell. They were starting to pale and shrivel. We considered the anguish on Brandy's face, and we chewed our dinners too.

We heard her say, Soil of the earth.

We need to be forthright. We were your mother's lovers, her friends, her enemies from time to time. We need you to know that with our fingers we'd memorized the particular angle of the small of her back. We were amused by the smallness of sneezes,

less so by her subtle insults. She had found the rainbow's pot of gold and laid it in our laps, and then wrecked our cars and hearts. She borrowed fine sweaters or Canadian galoshes we soon knew never to ask her to return.

Brandy rarely paid rent. We need your help, we told her. To own this place. In response, she called us *provincial*. But then there was another night when she was drunk and laughing and crying, telling us how the ache of belonging to no one and nowhere made her crazy, but if she only had bits of our bones ground down to powder to stand in with bare feet, then maybe she could claim a soil as her own.

That third summer was, for Brandy, turning twenty-five on the fourth of July, tiny pink strawberries, trees heavy with june berries, and squatting sunburned for hours on the treeless blueberry plains. And for our farm, money. Just a little, but our labor was paying off in the market.

August brought the bulging heirloom tomatoes we had babied since June, much more. Beyond the garden and into the woods also the effortless riches of raspberries and thimbleberries, and all the while your mother pocketed wintergreen leaves for tea, the white-fleshed fruits for refreshing jellies she slapped onto our sourdough slices each morning. In this season her hands were always red, she lived her days outside, ate and drank well, and fell in love.

As a group, we believed in a kind of freedom that worshipped sex, with few rules attached. On principle, we did not believe in monogamy. Also, all of us were coupling off around that time. This was not part of our plan, but there we were, changing.

If you had been alive then, had looked in at our farm as if through a window, you might have seen us like this:

Nat, the serious and responsible one, the most political, the kind of rare person blessed both with vision and steadfastness, quiet commitment to what was mundane, holding the house on her shoulders, while writing uncertain letters to the librarian with the light laugh who was working on her dissertation out on the west coast.

Paul, the sweet, straightforward man with the half-finished teaching certificate, who suffered a nervous breakdown in a teaching demonstration because he felt the public school classroom was flattening the future of creativity, giving puppy eyes to your mother's best friend, the one with the nursing degree.

And this almost nurse, Marissa—who'd never taken her exam, but had treated teargas-sprayed anarchists as a volunteer medic, and had once planned to travel the country, the world, perhaps with your mother in tow, to save the lives of the righteous—now tending her precious hens with blushing and giggling.

The restless musician, Mark—very good, struggled with focus and drinking too much—bringing a younger musician, Lise, back the farm, until, eventually, later, after your mother left, she stayed, and also drank too much. Mark sang all day as he worked, and Lise, in the quiet mornings, made buttermilk biscuits. She sat in the kitchen, knees curled up to her chin, bare feet poking out of a draping Merino sweater, big headphones over her ears and red hair, writing lyrics in a green notebook.

There were others too, of course. One very eloquent founding member who had been arrested for protesting twice. The big guy who always wore overalls and chain smoked. The wispy Canadian folk singing twins who didn't leave after they had been

invited out for a show. The retired professor who liked a good time. The philosophy graduate student who converted to Catholicism and drank all the whiskey. They came and went. Some remained single, some went back to school or work, and many later married and had children. One wanderer none of us knew well, we heard years later, was crippled in a bicycling accident.

What's important was that a remarkable thing was happening in a small group of people who didn't value monogamy.

Later, after your mother left, the first time, it became a joke to us, how what seemed to be holding our farm up was a network of unwavering, unofficial and childless unions, established in our late youth. One big marriage sewn together with smaller marriages that did not legally exist. We could have left any time, any of us, for any reason.

Your mother would leave us, and then, as we aged—twenty-eight, thirty, thirty-three—and the skin of our work stretched over the wound of her absence, and we settled into our quiet tethered lives, what became more important than our sexual wants or political rants or anything at the roots of our farm, was that together we had created an economy, and a community, that was willing and elastic and sincere. And for a long time, we believed this about ourselves. Our bindings, though their origins mysterious, were real, and complex. Each one of us was connected to someone else.

That is, except Wright.

We had thought it might work out differently, but then if it had, you would not exist, and after all this time we cannot imagine a world without you.

Mornings of this third summer, Brandy worked alongside Wright. He was the mastermind behind all the farm operations, which was respectable and important to Brandy. But more important was that they were on the same team—to save the earth—and also there was the way his arms looked when he pushed the wheelbarrow or when they went skinny dipping, and he hoisted her up out of the water and she wrapped her long legs around his trim waist.

In the past she'd gone for what she considered intellectual or artistic young men. Wright was a towering sex god with a black beard and tanned skin and blue eyes and big hands. But what he did with dirt and seeds and vines your mother found just as smart or arty as anything else, and it was—Wright had a gift for agriculture that he nurtured well, this was true—and also, for reasons that did not need to be fully understood or articulated these things made her want to fuck him, more often, and longer, harder, in the garden, in the back of the pickup, on a bed of straw which cut into their skin and left them bloody, up against the tables in the greenhouse, on the splintery swing hanging lopsided off the gnarled apple tree near the farm's fence, so far from the house that they thought nobody could hear, which is what everyone thinks when they are in that first fever of love, that nobody else hears or sees or knows. You will understand some day.

After lunchtime Brandy and Wright ran upstairs—who didn't back then?—and as they lay in bed and he closed his eyes in tired ecstasy she would breathlessly explain to him how she charted her menstrual cycle in accordance with the moon, and what the status of her cervical fluid was that day, and that he didn't need to worry. She would also mumble about all the leaves and berries and roots she was going out to wild craft that afternoon.

And so when Wright and the rest of us went to our town jobs or back into the fields, your mother returned to her foraging.

It's a necessary role in our community, she told us, a woven basket perched on her hip.

We'll be fakes, exploiters, if we don't engage the natural landscape, she said.

Sometimes these decrees made sense to us, like when we scooped maple berry sauce onto our homemade ice cream, but other speeches she glowered with the self-righteousness and meanness of a prophet:

Don't forget who you are, why you're here. Don't forget that it's a disease to value labor based on price tags.

We cocked our heads, touched our ears, opened our mouths. Then caught our tongues just as quick. We remembered the space of our place, the twenty acres around us. It seemed so endless at that time, and if we had made room for your mother's gifts, we could make room for the rest of her personality too.

Evenings, after dinner, Brandy pressured us into helping her with jams and chutneys or tarts to freeze, and then when it was very late, after the sun sank and the mason jars were left to set and beer cans lined the window sills and instruments were either put down or taken outside, she and Wright retired to his room, which was becoming her room.

Our country was at war in the Middle East, homeless people froze to death on urban benches, and entire families were deported to Mexico, El Salvador, elsewhere, and

far up in our quiet north, where the evils were easier to ignore, we were, for the first time, having fun. Campfires, swimming holes, dirty fingernails working the earth or digging into the skin of backs during sex, sex, sex. But it got hard. There was only so long we couldn't believe in money, institutions. We needed more than the little we took home from the farmers market, and if we were to be farmers then it was time to focus on larger, better yields. Coffee-can donations at house rock shows wouldn't buy our seeds or build a hoop house. Political knitting groups would not feed our stove, and without heat all the undyed wool in the world would not keep frostbite at bay. Hippie farmers grew weed, but as semi-anarchists we were afraid of the FBI and none of us wanted in that business anyway. We had to get real, or get out.

But let's return to the beginning, to those flowers tacked up on the wall, over the couch, next to the silly poster.

In the days after your mother added this simple decoration, the petals of course browned and fell into the upholstery, where they settled into a powder that disappeared in the fabric or floated away in the breeze that came through our windows. The twisted stems remained.

This memory—decay—lingered louder, made us resentful, then smug. But now we are older, and we see how deterioration, even rot, is inevitable. And perhaps not as interesting as your mother's small creative gesture, which was an act of love.

Chapter Two: All that is Wild and Good

In a chilly farmhouse, a group of young farmers sat around a humble kitchen table. Outside it was still dark, and they sipped coffee from big mugs, and ate toast and eggs, or spiced oatmeal from wooden bowls. They were braided or bearded, double canvas over their knees. The sink was full of dishes, and the home smelled good, like food and burning wood and candles and cool soil that would soon rot, but not yet. It was almost autumn, and they'd been doing this for a while.

Two women, Nat and Marissa, had found a big chalkboard at an estate sale, and now Paul, who was trained as a teacher and had the neatest handwriting, stood next to it, writing in his companions' names next to chores and tasks: move the chicken tractor; mow the rye cover on next spring's plot, harvest, harvest, harvest.

And Brandy, where are you today?

Brandy sat next to her boyfriend, Wright, the unofficial farm operations manager. She did not respond. The farmers looked to her, then to Wright.

In the woods, she said. To wild craft.

The other farmers stifled their sighs.

Brandy was realizing she did not actually want to be a farmer. Instead, wild plants captivated her, and now farming, even the chemical-free, small scale brand of her friends, felt unnatural. Brandy wanted to be natural, in all things, always.

To her delight—and her friend's quiet dismay—this season provided a girth of wild food. Most things she foraged were not products to be sold. This morning it was chokecherries. In the kitchen, she ate her oatmeal, and with brown sugar and raisins it

tasted plain as she imagined its potential with the added tartness from chokecherry fruits. She told them—Wright, Nat, Paul, Marissa, Mark, his little musical girlfriend from town who twitched her nose in an annoying way—the berries had high anti-oxidant levels. That the Indians had used them as medicine. Brandy didn't know anything else about these people, who still lived in the area, but for the last year she had been possessed by the urge to dwell in the bounty of nature, away from what human hands procured, in a different kind of system where the earth was free and she was the recipient.

Go, the farmers said, even Wright, who nightly held her naked body against his in sleep, and even Marissa, Brandy's dear, dear friend, who had abandoned a career in nursing and emergency medical care to street protesters to join the farm. Go, they said. Harvest your berries, cherries, whatever they are.

I will, and you'll all be glad we have them, Brandy said, as if promising some future disaster in which only chokecherries could remedy. She knew she was getting ugly, but couldn't help it.

In Marissa's direction, she added, Bet you never heard about chokecherries in nursing school, and she was right. She got up, and didn't wait to see the looks on her friends' faces.

By daybreak Brandy was passing the field and walking down the hill towards the creek. Her friends' words were sour in her throat. But the morning was beautiful. She crossed over a mushroomed log, and saw small fish swimming below her. Ahead where the property ended, there was a gap in the fence.

The woods opened up, but only a little, into the absentee-owned remains of a long-abandoned homestead of nineteenth-century Norwegians. The forest was reclaiming what it could, as it should, Brandy reflected. A few apple trees remained—invaders—and though she believed they never should have been planted, she did find beauty in the gold-tipped leaves of the survivors. Nestled into this area were the chokecherry trees too, laden with their dark and shiny fruits. These belonged, to the region, to the land, though Brandy wondered how and why they had popped up here, right smack in woods of evergreens and birch.

Anyway, Brandy was glad she would not be spending her morning weeding greens and thinning starchy roots. Glad her ass would not be up in the air as she dug in the dirt, because really, that wasn't far from being planted to a chair in a cubicle.

But, ah, the chokecherries took too long to gather. Brandy knew this. If she picked from the fruit, the flesh tore open at the stem. If she picked from the stem, she ripped off small branches. The flesh below her cuticles was raw and stinging. Brandy's arms ached and after two hours she'd only filled one basket. The trees looked as full as they ever had. There had to be some trick—an appropriate tool, no doubt—and it made her sad that here she'd lived around wild chokecherries her entire life, and yet had only just learned their name, their uses, their taste, and now they were besting her.

Still, she picked. She wished for a companion. Wright, to have sex with on a blanket spread out under the tree. Marissa, to chart future dreams. Any of the farmers would have done, too. She wanted kindness, a listening ear. And yet there was value in the solitude; ideas churned in her but were held under a great quiet. For Brandy—who was so social—this was new. She likened it to what she'd read about Zen.

At lunch the farmers ate quinoa and red beans and marinated kale, and were fixated on the fresh cut on Wright's arm. He had erred while fixing a fence. Brandy touched the deep gash nestled in his hairy flesh, and she touched the blood-hardened cotton shirtsleeve above the wound. She wanted to kiss it. Later, she would.

But first, she knew her mashed up chokecherries would help. What quick gratification, even vindication! She dabbed his skin with a ball of pulp in cheesecloth. Juice ran off his arm, into his lunch. Then, Brandy felt her brain and body filled up with a new and revolutionary thought. Her face changed, and she saw her friends notice.

I have a great idea.

Everyone looked up. Brandy was relieved to see the morning's tension had dissipated. She was a darling to them again, and they seemed to admire the way her chokecherries looked in their basket, and on Wright's skin.

What we need is a wild crafting branch of our farm, she said.

Huh?

Brandy was excited. She moved her hands as she talked.

This is how we can continue on with our farm while also reconciling its unnatural violence. See, it's a great compromise!

And she explained to them that if they wanted to be truly good people—of course they did!—then they could create an educational, possibly nonprofit sector, of the farm, devoted to exploring and honoring native plants and their uses.

What do you think?

But the farmers stared back at her. Brandy looked to Marissa, who shrugged, and said, I'm sort of interested in learning about ethnobotany.

This wasn't quite the affirmation Brandy was seeking. Wright focused on his food, and Nat's neutral frown was taking on the properties of a scowl. Mark and Paul carried on their own conversation, and of all things about how they thought the farm needed a tractor. Oh, what was happening? Brandy was falling out from their graces, and was becoming less convinced she wanted them.

This was not what she'd expected, and she talked through her hesitation, mumbling things like: Don't worry, I'll head it up! And, I'll do all the work, this won't trouble you at all, which then spiraled into the budget she would write, the best font for the logo she would affix to the aluminum salve tins and amber tincture bottles she would sell at the farmers market, alongside their vegetables.

Nat put down her fork.

You can't sell anything like that at our table. Licensing.

Brandy got up for second helpings. Without looking in Nat's direction, she said quickly, I'll get my papers in order. I'll have what I need by next summer.

Brandy considered the chokecherry wine. Would she sanitize her crock? No. Might soap and water do the job? Always. As she picked stems, Nat swung through the house—and it was Nat's house, Brandy felt—and paused.

I hope I didn't sound rude.

Brandy didn't look up and replied in a tight, cheerful voice what she planned to say several minutes before.

It's important to remember that there are a lot of lives that make our farm successful.

Brandy, I don't know if our farm is successful.

Well, it's certainly headed there, maybe more than I care for.

Look, sighed Nat. All I mean is that if you want to make some salves and sell them, I support you. You'll need to get organized and you'll need to throw in some of your money for containers and licensing. And I can help you with the paperwork.

Brandy put down her mangled handful of chokecherries and smiled at her friend.

Thank you. And then maybe we can talk about 501I(3) status and—

Nat shook her head. Small steps, she said. Comfrey salves, calendula salves, in cute and tiny glass jars.

That's not exactly what I'm trying to do.

A new sense of helplessness—worse than little conflicts—was bubbling in Brandy's heart.

Those are things we grow, that we're manipulating. Recycling into capitalism, she said, through her teeth.

Nat opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again. Then she smiled sweetly, sadly, and said, Are we cool?

Brandy twisted her long hair around a calloused finger. If you think so, I think so.

The two women sat and talked while Brandy mashed the chokecherries at the bottom of the crock, and they both wished the scarlet mess well as Brandy poured in a bit of boiling water, and then covered it all with a few layers of cheesecloth.

Now Brandy was ready to move on to her next project. She sprung up for more bowls and a strainer, some mason jars, grasping to the small slivers of peace Nat had given her.

A jelly with cinnamon and maple syrup, she explained to Nat, who frowned at the crock which remained in the middle of the counter where later dinner would need to be prepared. Brandy was chatty, detailing the project. Then, she saw Nat twitch.

Hey, what if we clean this up first, Nat said.

Oh.

Brandy shoved the crock back against the wall. Her loyalty to her friends, this place, was lurching.

Chapter Three: To Edgar

If we had urges to procreate over the years, we stifled them well, in different ways. It's not that we wouldn't have been willing. We told ourselves this, after your mother's secret was revealed. This was soon after she left the first time and it became clear she would not use her return flight ticket.

There'd been no evictions, no mandatory abortions. Everyone was free to do what they liked, as long as they were working.

How little we understood your mother, her choices, her motivations. We speculated then, and we speculate now. Maybe we're still wrong about everything, but we like this version more.

Looking back, to that windy night right before our fourth winter set down its solid eternal white, and the plans were made for your mother to go away—we would pay, but we needed space from her, for at least several weeks—we thought we were rejecting her. We stood by our resolve, but we felt guilty. We didn't know the half of it. Our guilt ate us, as the months of her absence passed. In hindsight, so many years later, it was always the other way around: she left us, and can we fault her?

Our fourth fall your mother made us chokecherry wine. After it fermented, the foam on top took on a grayish hue, and she almost lost the batch. Still, after it bottled, it was delicious, even with the lurking rot after the first sweetness on our tongues.

Your mother was alone on the porch bottling the dark pink liquid which was clearer than the wine of purple grapes, a little more subdued than beet juice. We scarcely

knew what it was, just hoped it would be safe and strong. We watched her from our outposts in the garden with the pumpkins and squash, or the tool shed, which was our barn at the time, and we puzzled.

Occasionally she stopped her work, and scrawled something into the small notebook she kept at her side these days. Ideas for her foraging, or whatever she called it, organization she wanted to start, we figured. We—the rest of us—were all so unified. How had she joined with us, after reading the same books, marching the same protests, dreaming the same dreams, and then want a very different life than the one we were pursuing? And why couldn't she understand our carefully, thoughtfully wrought desire to succeed as a farm? And how had we believed in her, when her goals lacked grounding, and she refused to acknowledge the very safety net that allowed her to exist, with us, for free?

Your mother was asking the same questions, in a way. She felt the wood she sat on growing cold. Summer was ending. The porch would constrict, the doors would be loose in their frames again. She sighed, and we felt her breath travel like wind out to us, around our toiling bodies, telling us what we already knew: she had to go.

And yet, there are more important memories.

The first cold front was early that year. One afternoon we were drinking beers under an oak tree, wearing light flannels and jeans, your mother casually collecting the first fallen acorns for flour while flirting with Wright. Then, in a shock, by dusk we were willing our row cover to multiply in length and width, to magically stretch to save the wide fringes of our field, which were rich with big money heirloom tomatoes we were

desperate to sell. It had dropped from sixty-five to forty-three, and would plunge lower, to twenty-six, before dawn.

Shit shit shit was the refrain that evening. And, how could we have been so stupid? After four years, still amateurs? Delicate plants on the edge of our garden? Not enough row cover? We chastised ourselves. The air grew colder, and the clouds parted for the blue-white moon.

I have an idea, said your mother. We rolled our eyes, if we paid her heed at all, and then she drove away in a borrowed car, yelling out the window, I don't know if it will work, but I've got a hunch!

And an hour later, she was back, backseat heaping with smelly thrift store bed skirts. She'd barged in just before closing, she explained to us, and when the cashier on duty told her they were closing, she'd smiled and sped straight for the linens. We tucked our vegetables into these ratty gray-white poly-blend scraps, and the losses were light.

Your mother understood what was required of her, if she wanted to maintain autonomy. She was not afraid to forge ahead, alone. This, we know. It was the one constant in her life.

Despite the good sex, Brandy worried Wright would never be able to seek truth in the way she did. Still, he was kind and smart and knew where and when and how to touch her, and she enjoyed future fantasies about him, like young lovers do. In these thoughts, a woven ring, or a pregnant belly swathed in her long golden hair. Maybe a home birth in water, with Wright's hands below her, ready to pull the tiny being into the next part of

life. These lush imaginings were never the basis of sex or work or both with Wright, but they more and more they undergirded her days on the farm, except on the days when she found Wright brutish, the rest of us too capitalist, or stupid.

Then, soon after she saved us with bed skirts, and soon after the fall equinox, after she collected crab apples and made pies and closed up the stage for the cold season, your mother sat in the bathroom of a drug store in town and looked at two pink lines on a plastic stick. Inside her uterus was a part-Wright bale of cells, she was a little surprised by how desperately she wanted to be rid of it.

She didn't tell us anything, not then.

Your mother was prepared to have an abortion, on principle. Deep inside, she knew she could do it. Women know these things about themselves, regardless what other people would guess about them. There may be a woman who has never longed for a child, who then cannot bring herself to terminate a pregnancy, and makes an impossible space in her full life. Who's to say if it was right or wrong, but this happens. And yet abortion may be a natural choice for another woman who expects to burn for a baby, but not now, not with him, not in this stage of life. Your mother was in this latter category, and you—exactly, perfectly you—were the baby burned for, later. Of all the what-ifs of her life, her reproductive choices, to her, remained clear in retrospect. This is good.

Yet your mother, who knew she would have to leave our farm, in her own time, and knew she could terminate a pregnancy, had not imagined what an abortion looked like. And why would she? She and her partners had each time prevented pregnancy, until this.

What would be the movements of an abortion, start to finish, for Brandy? The phone call, and then there would be the scrounging up of a few hundred bucks. This would involve getting her hands on some decent pot, to sell to college kids. Borrowing money, from us, to terminate a Brandy-Wright combination would not be an option.

Why not? We would have helped. Ah, we paid lip service to our farm staying baby free, no matter what. But we were the would-be aunts and uncles, ready to dote at the first mention of a child. Family. We couldn't have known this about ourselves, then. But she must have sensed it: that we would see what was inside her as more than a fetus but a baby, and our baby. Our baby! And so, she did not tell us a thing, until after she was gone.

In the concrete lavatory with the positive test, Brandy knew what she needed to do. But she had not imagined the crinkle of the papers she would sign, the stirrups which would hold her stolid, tingling feet, the strange options: pills or aspiration? She had not anticipated the stench of her sweat in the waiting room. What a filthy release of nerves, compared to the salty drops that rolled down her skin when she worked outside, with living things, under the sun. And then the discomfort, the blood? No, this had never crossed her mind except for the vague and correct notion that whatever an abortion felt like would be far less painful than childbirth. But still, even with these unpleasant unknowns, your mother knew she would do it, whatever the scenery, machinery.

She also had not imagined the intensity of the sweetest of feelings: that freedom, though threatened, remained. There was still time for her to take a different route.

Because of the when and how and who of it all, pregnancy, and then abortion, would also incite a move across the world, and a dramatic exit of the closest thing to

home your mother, at that point, had ever experienced. She had the abortion in secret— exactly when, we'll never know, though we sometimes looked back and guessed dates— and after that she had to leave, quickly. The final act of the procedure: to extract herself from our home, to not come back.

By the end of fall, your mother had broken it off with Wright, and it seemed, all of us. The connection was lost, at most times. She spent her days in the woods, in the kitchen, in town, reading about native plants and ethnobotany at the public library. She was sick a lot, she said. She had a pulled back muscle. She made small mentions of wanting to travel, to somewhere tropical, if she could. Wright smiled through it, mumbling that being just friends was fine. What a lie, everything. We couldn't live with her, but she couldn't afford to live without us. Something had to change.

With our vegetable cash and our minimum wages, we bought her a round-trip ticket to Costa Rica. Your grandparents—not on the best terms, four states away—loaned her money to pay for an English language teaching certificate, back in the days when that sort of thing didn't take a full college degree. We figured she would come back, move to the closest city, teach refugees, pay her bills, grow a small garden, collect alley weeds and call them miracles. It seemed the perfect plan, to keep our impossible friend at a distance. Yet your mother stayed gone.

If we can indulge a little more, you should know, we never forgot your mother's quickness in catching chickens, and also the pitch in her voice when she roused us in our rest to ask for shoulder rubs after a long day of wild crafting. Often she orchestrated

elaborate dinner parties of finicky dishes full of spices we could barely pronounce and wild flowers we had never noticed. She speckled our large table with tiny jars and bottles of fern leaves, evergreen sprigs. Then we would tell stories, and there would be music and dancing and we were amazed at our luck to live in such a magical time and place.

The hammock she crocheted with help from a town friend suspended from the yard oak every summer, even after she left, and for several years it remained tight, beautiful, comfortable.

As our farm became more successful, our radicalism melted away and we told ourselves your mother should have never been so broke or angry, when she could do many things well. It could have been different.

We couldn't forget how sad she looked when she accused us of selling out, after we'd accused her of sucking us dry.

Oh, but we'll return to the sweet moments. There were some, even after we'd all agreed she would go. We savored how she called us her heart friends. The kind that last forever. After she was gone, we could still see her passport photo, and we hadn't all had passports then, or still didn't. In the brief moments when she wasn't cold or angry, near the end of her first stay with us, there were your mother's words in our kitchen, on our porch swing, in the airport's lobby, I'll be back soon, I promise.

Chapter Four: Scratch Creek

It wasn't a full day after she finished bottling the chokecherry wine that Brandy realized the crab apples were red, ripe, and then falling, past their peak. And for weeks, she'd promised hot crabapple pie for the outdoor concert the farm was putting on—the last of the season—which was that night! How had she fallen so far behind? It didn't take her long to see the answer: tribes, communities, not individuals, had met the swell of nature's bounty.

Brandy was irritable as she stood in the doorframe and zipped herself into one of Marissa's too-short jackets and stepped into Nat's too-small rubber boots. The other farmers were already in the greenhouse and the fields. She was tired of doing these tasks alone, and even more annoyed that no one—not even Marissa, or Wright—seemed to credit what she was doing as work.

A drizzle was rolling in from the lakeshore. The weather website on the bulky desktop promised a clear and balmy evening. There were rumors of colder weather coming soon, but Brandy couldn't yet believe it. Still, she knew the world was both resisting and readying for closure, again.

Brandy felt off that day. She was bloated and didn't want to gather fruit, bake pies. She really didn't want to do a thing but hide under a light blanket. Yet she pushed herself—she craved the satisfaction the evening would bring, all those station wagons creeping in on the farm's long dirt road. The city people would unload, their pale faces beaming desire. And so, Brandy went to the crabapple trees with love. Perhaps this is the ultimate love, or the meaning of life, she reflected from an abundant and sturdy branch.

At lunch, she sliced and cored crabapples.

Nat asked, Farm names, anyone?

Soil Revolution—

No, too anarcho, she snapped immediately.

What? Come on.

Wright laughed and Brandy cut into her knuckle with the paring knife. Shit, she whispered, and sucked her skin. What she needed was a crabapple corer. The apple corer was too big, of course.

Please don't tell me you're worried the FBI's got an eye on us.

I'm not convinced they don't, said Paul.

Mostly, I don't want any train-hopping scumfucks stealing our food and botching up our garden. And with that kind of name they'll stick to us like maple syrup.

Weren't we all once those train-hopping scumfucks?

Hey, hey, hopping a train does not make one a scumfuck, and you know that.

But scumfucks always hop. Don't want any of it, trust me.

Marissa nodded along. Brandy watched her friend, and for a moment, wished she'd never come here. Wished that Marissa was not falling in love with Paul, but back on loud streets dabbing the bloody foreheads of people much more righteous than any of them were, now, that they were creating a business, and then daring to call others bad names.

On and on ping ponged the opinions. Meanwhile, Brandy cut herself again.

Wright saw and brought her a cool wet washcloth and fork fed her a bite of the bland

lunch, and Brandy mumbled something about how she wished she had a comfrey salve – translation: I wish I wasn't the only one who had to make the herbal medicines. And her head was hot with other kinds of anger, too. The tool she did not, could not, have! It was imperialist. Capitalism at its worst. Racist. Why shouldn't there be a crabapple corer?

Brandy watched the community she thought she knew quibble and use words like marketability and those who looked at her noticed her face: disgust. They were becoming the enemy. Purity swelled in her gut.

Well, began Wright. What about *Erresistentzia*? But it wasn't like him and everyone laughed.

What the hell is that?

Basque?

Honestly, said Nat, picking a small piece of quinoa—always quinoa—off her chin. We have *got* to stop with the political names.

Odporność is Polish, yelled the voice of a newbie who didn't stay long from around the corner behind the computer. Some of us have to be Polish, right?

Wait, what about the old Norwegian farm nextdoor?

Serious. No resistance. No revolutions. Let's keep a low profile, please.

I told you, you *are* afraid of the FBI.

From the computer again, *Motstand!*

Nat rubbed her temples. Have you ever been handcuffed during a book club meeting? Well, I have. Denver, '96. I was only nineteen.

What about The Wildwoods? Brandy suggested, taking a break from her task. This had come to her in a flash and she'd said it without hesitation. Nobody had asked

her how she was doing with nonprofit planning, and in truth she'd been too busy to start the paperwork she figured she needed, but still, this was a gesture.

Marissa perked up but Nat's curt smile cut. Paul shrugged thoughtfully, and then said, I think I like what you're getting at. But it kinda sounds like one of those housing developments called Birch Landing or Ash Lane Community or Wild Rice Estates where civilization is paying an insincere tribute to whatever nature it has just destroyed. And these woods are going to get a little less wild with each garden we grow.

What he said, added Nat.

God, that's bleak, said Brandy.

Well, said Wright. Isn't that farming? His voice hinted malice. Also not like him.

Brandy turned to face him.

What?

Wow.

Fight the power with your crabapple pie, said Wright, half smiling, half mean, his voice wobbling.

Hey, hey, said Nat, stepping into the diplomat role that she or Paul traded. I think we can all live in nuance, right? We can nurture the wild, and forage its fruits. We can admit that even the most sustainable farming isn't natural. We can *compromise*. We can do this.

But Brandy was ignited. Her own lover.

Natural was working just fine for people *before*.

Brandy looked to Marissa for support. They'd had a good conversation on anarcho primitivism recently when Brandy was trying to enlist her help in her nonprofit

hopes, and Marissa had admitted that maybe agriculture was part of the problem. But Marissa looked away. Nat put her head in her hands.

No, no, no. Stop this, said Paul.

What?

I mean, you're right, Brandy, sure. But. This conversation is too big. Too political, too gross. We are all here. We have to move forward or quit.

While he spoke Wright tried to take Brandy's hand, but she jerked it away. She stood up, and began collecting the un-cored crab apples she'd allotted to those who'd promised their help, but scarfed their lunches instead. It looked like she'd have to do it all on her own, and there wasn't time for dawdling now. Outside the sun was breaking through and half the table was bathed in warmth.

Marissa squinted in the light. She said, Hey, what about Scratch Creek?

Paul nodded. Like the creek down the street?

Is that what it's called?

Exactly.

Nat clapped her hands. See! That's perfect! It's not saying or not saying anything. Everybody wins.

Brandy shook her head, and turned on the radio. This was not a conversation she wanted to hear anymore. This would not be her landing spot after all.

It was Brandy's last farm concert, which was also the first "Scratch Creek" concert. There was the scruffy and talented yet foul-mouthed opening band, then the mop-haired fiddler in a mauve dress who taught music at UU camps during the summer.

Mark and his girlfriend bopped along, ready to steal the show with their chemistry and skill.

At seven pm, there was only a sliver of light from the west. The trees swayed, small jars of tea-light fire under leaves like precarious earrings. Smoke puffed from the woodstove's chimney that protruded square from the rickety greenhouse. Before the stage, there were blankets on the grass, thick and wool and vintage, primary colors, or pink and sea green, frost blue, striped, vaguely Native American inspired prints. Sparkling atop these the fashionable ruddy and blonde people of the towns. Drinking beer in bottles, wine in jars, whiskey or coffee in mugs. Everyone eating Brandy's hard-fought pie with their hands, licking their fingers, scraping cooked and sugary crabapple gunk from the blankets, consuming it fuzz an all with pink tongues, wheat-soft teeth.

Brandy stood back to watch her success. Yet it was hard to enjoy; a badness nagged her. She sipped a beer, wondering if something stronger would make her feel better. The music was pensive in a way that made her, and rest of the farmers too, because they were so young, imagine it as the soundtrack to an important life.

The music moved her to begin grasping for new plans, and fly, but why, and to where? While Brandy felt herself seized, the very same song drew in Wright, who'd been off doing a chore that could have waited. He found Brandy, and from behind wrapped his big arms around her middle.

He leaned forward and whispered for the first time into Brandy's ear, into anyone's ear, I am so in love with you.

PART II

Chapter Five: To Edgar

For ten years, we heard little from your mother. Short and cryptic email messages mentioning adventures, a courthouse wedding photograph with no address but a stamp in Venezuela, a voicemail half in Spanish, a rumor.

And then, the shock of a letter. To preserve the international stamps, we removed Brandy's legal pad sheet from the envelope in delicate pinches. This was when we first learned of you.

Things are bad here, and in the spring, I will bring Edgar. Your mother's scrawling in weak ink.

The letter did not tell us much except: she was living somewhere rural, near the Venezuela-Columbia border, was working as a defender of native habitats, had this role because her husband—yes, husband, so strange to read, as if we hadn't believed the photo years earlier—*Hernan's* family happened to own the large swath of land that held the preserve. We learned too she was a mother, and also, in grave danger. No explanation.

So, we began searching beyond the skimmed headlines of news websites. We read the—sensationalized or true?—stories of your new home—the drugs, the administrative changes, kidnappings, murders—until we couldn't. We learned Venezuela was a state with fertile ground but few landowners—white, we read, we groaned—who did not cultivate their soils to feed their country, but to farm cattle, mostly. Or it sat. There was

failing agricultural infrastructure, where there was any. Attempts, and there were many—Chavez had pretty much mandated this—to redistribute were mired in violence. Even if the landowners didn't always have the deeds to their land, they did have guns.

What the long-muted anarchists in our heads said: liberate the land, let the peasants farm! To the Indigenous! Of course Brandy's in trouble, what did she expect, living on land that was never hers?

The politics of your homeland are an interesting story, and not ours to tell, and because we were not there with your mother when she committed her life to the land of those fraught and beautiful borderlands, we don't have anything else to say. When you are old enough to ask those questions, adventures will await.

What is our story is the narrative spun from our shadowy sides: imaginings of Brandy, writing this note, others, by flashlight, firearm spread across her lap, golden blaze of hair glinting against the sweating metal. We didn't want to think about whom she might be prepared to shoot.

We sank into this daydream separately, and then together. It became a warm solace in the predictable nadir of our cold season. We sensed the alpacas shifting on the dry grass where they slept uneasily behind your house. We did more research, and realized there were likely no alpacas. We agreed that everything your mother touched was lush, and also perhaps there were jaguars hiding in the hills she was trying to save.

Ah, and we saw Hernan. Your father. We hated him, which wasn't his fault, or yours. So handsome in the picture. The fact that he was a landowner of sorts, in Venezuela, made us detest him. It was a strange space we were in, and we thought of him and your mother constantly.

We could not be sure he was still as muscular, or had his beard. And sometimes, we could not quite convince ourselves that he was real, but we knew somehow your mother would be the same: smart, inquisitive, but detached, beautiful and bright with her fawn-colored freckles and strong blue-veined hands and calloused elbows and dangerous collection of neglected moles.

In one fantasy, your father rested his hand on your mother's shoulder when it was his turn to take watch. We heard them whispering in Spanish as they exchanged the gun. We felt the movie-like glimmering burn of shantytowns up on the ridge above your rolling valley, shacks and lean-tos brimming with hope and rage.

Our country was on fire, too. Occupy and police violence and racial tension and all that. In the past, we would have been there, with the protesters, getting arrested if we could. Yet now we shook our heads, or read a news story at most. We did not believe any flames lapped our frozen fences, which were built for deer, foxes and wolves, and sagged under the winter's weight. If our public radio station said otherwise, we couldn't know through the static.

So, Brandy was in danger and our nation's politics were a mess, and we vaguely wished the world well, and continued to clear back the woods in the snow. We often squinted over spreadsheets, wondering if Scratch Creek farm would make a profit that year, or the next. Yet we held a calm confidence that if we wanted, our gardens would expand and yield.

Then, suddenly, a deflating. The prospect of planning for another season felt insurmountable. We'd walked through existential crises in the past. But this was something else. A great stifling.

What precipitated this? When for the eleventh time a hawk took out half the chickens, but for once we didn't readily replace them? Or, something even more subtle, as simple as each day looking at the drained, sad faces of the other humans we loved.

We were leaving—no, we had left—our youth and after years of farming we asked ourselves what it meant that we had quit our jobs and schools and joined our funds and decided to have less, or none, of everything. In your mother's long absence, we had done well, but personal space and money was still sparse. Six fully finished bedrooms now—for three couples and a single, one an office, another for art and stretching and guests—two toilets, one claw-foot tub with a wobbling shower, and a welcoming porch. Behind the home a kitchen garden, across from the porch the greenhouse and two hoop houses, small cold frame boxes. From there, a grassy area with a few benches that had once been our stage but was now a community classroom space. There were plots and plots, rotated from strawberries to early or late summer vegetables to potato patch to chicken or turkey pasture, to cover crops of ryegrass and clover and more cut down just before their peak, and beyond that, our hopeless asparagus, and lucrative raspberries, blackberries, blueberries to which we owed our thanks. Apple trees and juneberries fringing all of it. We gave each other haircuts and darned our socks until they disintegrated in our boots. And why?

For the first time ever that fall before your mother's letter arrived, we didn't have an answer. Well, we planned anyway, but our world had changed. We could not go on forever. A division was coming.

While we had no children, of course, each one of us were slowly birthing other desires, mostly unspoken, always unrealized. No sudden movements, but we were in an

awkward and uneven constant push. Half-emerged hopes. Once they were born, they would not get along. We kept still.

We kept as still as we could, and we kept on. Into the winter we knowingly followed what felt like a nightmare, awaiting the summer, when we would, at least one more time, hustle like a trapped hamsters in the sparkling dream that was our livelihood. And there was one thing consistent, that our home was warm and safe, and despite our hunger for wants, we never went in need.

Life was slower and colder after the letter. We couldn't tell your mother that perhaps our beloved Scratch Creek would not make it, because we could not yet say it aloud to each other.

Over stew and bread and beer we gathered most evenings, adding logs to the stove, and, as days grew longer, new life to old memories of your mother. We knew by heart the progression that led up to her leaving, but we could not agree on what made Brandy stay away.

Was her love real? Or had she been bored, disappointed?

But weren't we asking these questions, imaging ourselves as the leavers, though we did not dare say the words?

Or, what we also couldn't say: If Brandy's letter was true, and she was really coming back, maybe to stay, might she spark our dying thing? Would we let ourselves be magicked into new fervor for those old commitments? Or, she would drive us to such rage that we would a) once again suture ourselves into the safety of one another or b) disband.

We hid the answers to these unasked questions in our hearts. But what is tricky about that is we, as you know, are more than one heart.

Ah, we wanted to set down a feast. We wanted to laugh until we cried, dancing all night. We wanted to throw wine in her face. And then turn on each other, with claws.

We ate in anticipation, told more stories, dissatisfaction a flammable, silent, tasteless gas around us. Outside the last blizzards pummeled budding trees and the fleshy petals of the more foolish tulips, again and again. We regarded the stamps of your homeland, all parrots and bananas and block letters, little patches of quiet expectation we almost could not bear, from where they were wedged between magnet and the smooth white of our otherwise bare refrigerator.

On the first spring evening of that year when we knew the warmth would remain, we received a phone call. Your mother Brandy, in the Caracas airport. Her voice, rushed and assuming. In twenty-seven hours, she'd arrive. Would we drive the ninety minutes to the airport? Were we ready? We nodded and held our breaths, and then the next morning set out to our fields.

We inoculated our snow and snap peas with rhizobium bacteria sprinkled from plastic packets. We glittered our rows with the seeds of radishes and carrots, beets and onions. We stooped in our hoop house, filling it with French lettuces, and in our greenhouse, we stirred together potting soil and stamped out soil blocks—hundreds, and then thousands—until our thumbs blistered. Into each square we injected the sharp end of a cucurbit or nightshade seed. Lemon cucumber. Turkish eggplant. Cherokee Purple slicing tomato. Buttercup squash. Our hands moved so quickly and yet we had no idea

what we were doing. Every seed was the same when there was your mother's hurried and muffled voice to consider.

The arrival drew nearer, the soil was as planted as it could be for the day, but still no plane that might pass overhead was the one we wanted. So we looked out over our tables of cruciferous vegetable starts and young kitchen herbs, and argued over if this was the right time to set the bigger ones out on their own. As the sky periwinkled, we were not thinking about you. Given how averse we were to children on farms, we barely considered your existence. Our breaths became fog, and we shut in our plants, pulled ghostly gauzy covers up over our wet rows, and returned to our ambling farmhouse, to wait.

Chapter Six: Last Things

Nat swept the floors. She checked the guest sheets for stains and spiders. They had both. She remade the bed, and wished Helen were home, instead of in Minneapolis, at a librarian conference. And Helen was also with friends, possibly a lover, because she lived other lives specially arranged away from Nat and the farmers and land of Scratch Creek, many weekends, which was fine with Nat, most of the time.

This is a thing we can handle, she said to nobody, and then walked into the kitchen. There was Marissa, eyes all red, chopping chiles pickled the previous autumn. A heap of onions on a wooden cutting board, the aggressive aroma of roasting garlic from the glowing oven.

Are you crying or is it the vegetables?

Does it have to be different? Marissa replied. Almost a snap in her voice. Nat inhaled and blinked. Marissa kept speaking. Should I use tomato for the salsa, or no? We have three jars left but I really want her to feel at home.

Sure, Nat said, reaching far back into the pantry. She wasn't hungry but hoped salt or mindless chewing would ease her nerves. And she wished she were at a conference, in her own big city, perhaps as a graduate student. Or, with Helen, and that Helen was with her, and they were out to eat, dipping injera into wat and then drinking cocktails all while talking with very smart people, and then they would go home to their mid-century apartment and its houseplants and vermiculture setup and get into their comfortable bed with their respective books.

As Nat popped corn kernels on a cast iron, she watched her anxious friend move about fluidly in the tidy yellow and cream kitchen, reaching for knives and appliances

and odd-sized bowls that were specific and useful and always in the right spot. God, it was a beautiful, functional space. A reflection of who they had become, she believed. She took back her previous fantasy, for a moment, and enjoyed the ache of the space's perfection. She snapped a photo with her phone. Marketing the farm this way was her guilty pleasure, but also a necessity. It was a business skill, for a farmer to see life and the world in professional photographs, admired by many.

Do we have enough coffee? Light roast the way Brandy likes? Marissa asked between the food processor's pulsing.

But Nat didn't have to answer. She nodded to the coffee and tea cabinet, and all the cabinets were without doors, on purpose. Yes, they had everything they needed. And Nat considered the last time she was in this kitchen with Brandy. It was a memory of a memory of a memory now. They'd all been drinking homemade wine out of huge jars, sitting on the floor. Nat was leaned up against the cabinet door under the sink. Some people were crying. Mark strummed his banjo. Brandy talked and talked, about her perceptions and plans, as if she hadn't been angry.

Nat had been meditating, though they couldn't tell. But that day so long ago, while they came together to bid farewell to Brandy, she was mindfully existing in the filth. Breathing in and out under the piles and piles of crusted dishes. The cold stinking sponges. The stove scabbed over with orange and red and brown a million times. The crock of cabbage, fermenting but not exactly into kraut. A vat of black something that was supposed to be kombucha, though it did not bubble, and the sunken Scobie was shedding chunks. The flecked and oily baseboards. She was at peace with the unfastened and spilling plastic bags and upturned rodent-nibbled boxes and unlabeled jars upon jars

of dry foods living in the dark behind the closed cabinet doors—those damn doors!—on the sticky and peeling contact paper, amidst tiny brown pellets of mouse shit. Soon, she'd told herself. She'd drawn diagrams, and made a mixed-tape for the makeover. Soon.

That smells delicious, Marissa said. Nat poured the popcorn into a large bowl, salted it, and plopped it on the counter next to Marissa. You know, I haven't eaten all day, I didn't even realize how hungry I was.

Nat shoved the popcorn closer to her friend.

I promise I'll clean up, in a minute, Marissa said, reaching both hands into the steaming bowl. I just have to get some food in my belly first.

Nat smiled, and nodded. She hid in her chest a tightening panic. She knew Marissa was explaining herself because Brandy was returning. At Scratch Creek Farm cleaning up was expected. Messes were not tolerated and over the years this had changed from mandate to collectively internalized law and so what did it mean that Marissa was saying that? And as quickly as the panic came it left, because wouldn't clutter and chaos solve the problem which raged in Nat? An easy out?

Marissa kept mumbling about cleaning until Nat said, Really, it's fine. Just eat the popcorn.

Together, they devoured it.

~

The popcorn aroma wafted upstairs. Wright didn't notice it with the open windows, though. All he could smell was wet, and his nose was very cold. Still, it was comforting to hear the farm's evening sounds, the subtle calls—either hoped for or real—of birds returning from the south. He liked birds.

Of all the bedrooms Wright's bedroom was the smallest. It took on its tiniest proportions yet as he sat wrapped in a wool blanket on his bed and read about small-scale grain cropping. The book was as old as he was and he'd read it almost every spring for the last ten or so years. And though the black and white photos of the hardy family raising their wheat still inspired, and he understood their own soil composition and weather patterns would be ideal for rye, he knew it would never fly. This was because it was also a text about imagination.

Where's the infrastructure? Nat had asked the first three times he'd suggested a grain operation. She'd said, with Paul nodding along, Are time-saving tools available to us, or would this be a time suck?

Infrastructure, efficiency, *time suck*, that's all they ever talked about it seemed, sometimes. Scratch Creek Farm was no longer a place where a guy could dream. And yet begrudgingly he agreed, really. They could pay their bills.

He knew if he wanted to try new things, then he would have to apply for a job. In the last few years he had begun nearly ten applications, submitted none. He had a new one in the works yet, the best option he'd seen.

Wright spent most of his time working, or reading about his work. Of course everyone on the farm had their partner, and Wright, despite a new girlfriend in town who was crazy about him, he had the farm. He was a lover to the soil and plants and animals, and what kept him awake at night and filled his dreams were all the ways he might better dance with them, to yield more food, yes, but also because farming brought him joy.

Instead of sending off his completed resume and cover letter, he opened a notebook and with a mechanical pencil began to draft his rye plans. After six pages and

two field layouts he had to piss. Someone was in the bathroom. He turned away to start down the stairs, outside, when Lise burst open the door, a mound of clothes at her feet.

Sorry! Just a sec!

Wright kept going. He hollered, It's all yours.

~

Lise heard the door that connected to the porch creak open and shut. A second later the patch of cool air had floated up to the second story. She shut herself back inside the bathroom, where her sage-scented soy candles burned next to the soap dish and on top of the toilet.

Women on the farm did not usually wear makeup, except for Lise who each day put on red lipstick, and then wiped it off. She did this for the same reason she sewed into her dungarees floral patches and kept her brown work boots laced in a turquoise that brought out the cooler hues in the petite tattoos that graced her pale forearms and contrasted against the big orange ball of hair atop her head. She liked things that were pretty but even more it felt important to set herself aside in this way.

Lise took a long look at herself in mirror. The blue jersey dress would do. She thought about the muscles in her arms, which had grown tauter in the time Brandy had been gone. A bored near-but-not-quite prodigy yawning through music school, she had only just moved in with Mark when Nat had rallied up the money for Brandy's plane ticket. No pressure, Nat had said in a way that felt like a lot of pressure. Though Lise was broke she had driven to the city three nights in a row and busked her heart out for the tourists at the busiest corners. Every coin and bill thrown into her case went straight to Nat and this was okay because Lise had wanted Brandy as far away as possible.

It had been a childish impulse, in hindsight. Sex was loose back then, and as soon as Brandy had left, Lise could see she'd never had anything real to worry over. Wright was devastated and whatever Brandy had briefly with Mark was unconnected and youthful and about bodies. Now she was a married expat mother and while Lise and Mark's union was of course not documented on paper their left ring fingers were tattooed and together they had raised up a family of complex songs and after all these years if anything was going to destroy them, it certainly wasn't sex.

Lise turned around to examine her long slender neck, which pleased her, and the slight shape of her hard buttocks, which did not. Once she had been supple but now she was strong. More and more and especially in this moment while thinking about beautiful and carefree Brandy this made her sadder than she felt it should, because it was disconnected from what she actually wanted. This was supposed to have been the time in life where she lit up international stages and mesmerized audiences and had claims on studio space and multiple backup instruments. And it's not that she and Mark hadn't tried but they always ended up back at Scratch Creek, at first relieved, then restless.

That was all okay to be sad about, but there she was, swallowing un-cried tears back down from her nasal passages because of her butt. It seized her up so much that she wouldn't be able to go downstairs and practice, she knew. Yet she had to keep, keep playing because that was all there was, and playing good music in the same five bars was better than nothing. She opened up her makeup bag and took out one of her pills. She'd been trying to stop taking them as they hurt her lyric writing ability but she couldn't stay in the bathroom for the rest of her life. She gulped it down with water. Took a breath. Okay. Okay.

Downstairs her upright bass waited like a cold body needing a lover's warmth. Lise wanted to go to it but where was Mark? His banjo sat similarly lonesome on the gray wingback. He had said he'd be down there. Yet that was a long time ago, before the outfit changes. In the kitchen Nat and Marissa were having a conversation that sounded uninviting, and Lise felt relieved she'd taken her pill because going out to find Mark would be a better use of ten minutes than feeling bad about how Brandy's impending return was taking the household back to the time before Lise belonged. She missed her fellow outsider Helen for a moment, and was also jealous of the arrangement she and Nat had, where Helen could come and go as she pleased. Lise set outside. Men's voices rubber banded out from where the yard ended and the barn sat and the woods began.

By day the maples looked like spring, their leaves greener than limes. In the dark it felt as winter as ever. She smelled cigarettes and then saw their tiny lights. When Mark offered Lise his flask, she drank, eagerly. But she almost spat it out, not because the burn wasn't good, but because she had expected bourbon and what she found in her mouth was brandy. Maybe Paul noticed her unease—she swallowed anyway. Paul was talking about some eagle he'd seen. He'd looked her way and held a syllable too long, but not that long. So against her better judgment she took some more, and then handed the flask to Mark. A week before they had talked about maybe trying out not drinking, as an experiment, to health, to musical excellence. At least until she felt like she could quit her meds. They also whispered *Nashville* and she wondered, will Nashville help me quit my meds, or should I not actually quit my meds, or is my life collapsing a little bit? They'd done it before. But this was special circumstances, Lise reminded herself. She asked Mark to come practice with her.

I thought you'd never ask, he said.

Write Brandy a welcome home song, Paul said.

Oooh, Brandy, Brandy, Mark began, his arm now linked with Lise's. You better have a good excuse for all this... shit.

It was a terrible tune and Wright laughed too loud. Paul patted him on the shoulder which was a kind of acknowledgement. Lise and Mark walked away, holding hands.

~

You okay? Paul asked Wright in the dark woods.

Why not? Wright lit another cigarette.

You have a voice, you know. You didn't have to be okay with this.

Wright said nothing.

Paul and Wright were long bonded over the intricacies of farming and building small structures and found good housemates in each other. They watched wildlife and skied around the farm in the winter and were very good at making fire but whenever Paul tried to talk about life his friend shut down. And the pain Paul had in mind—that moment so long ago when Wright might have become a father (not that Wright had ever expressed remorse over this part of losing Brandy, but Paul did not like to think of himself as someone who projected his own needs onto other people)—he could not express but he had to say something.

It's okay if this is weird for you.

Look, Wright said. I'm gonna go back in, okay?

And do what?

Wright looked out through the dark, towards the fence that marked the border of the farm. After a time, he cleared his throat.

Cry into my pillow, he said. And then masturbate.

Paul stared at him, and laughed. Wright laughed, too, but he did turn away and he walked back to the house, and Paul felt maybe not sad but something for his friend, because he knew it was true, in a way.

So now Paul was alone in the woods. He breathed in the night and smelled the rot of exposed earth and wood and leaves, and then, after a bit, the chimney's smoke. The house would be warm and he would be welcome there, but he wanted to be alone a little longer. He was perhaps the only person truly happy—though he wanted to believe Marissa was, too—at Scratch Creek then, and he would savor the last bit of calm.

The wind gusted, sending a spattering of water drops atop Paul's close-shaved head. He'd gone without a hat on principle that spring evening. From inside he could hear the banjo and bass and though it beckoned him in he remained a few more minutes, forging a sort of wordless prayer that didn't know whom it was asking what.

~

Sometimes Lise and Mark's music was naïve, or coy. Other times, they asked for things directly, in the folk tradition. One knee up on the wingback, Mark picked his banjo fast with his eyes closed. He couldn't hear Nat or Marissa any longer, their strange conversation which had migrated from the kitchen to the dining table around a bottle of wine the four of them were now sharing.

Mark beckoned change with each chord. But not the runaway kind he kept failing to attempt. No, he would pledge his allegiance to Scratch Creek, again, because this was where heaven was waiting. Here.

Mark believed: they would revamp the community stage, with Brandy's help and enthusiasm. He and Lise would hire a fiddler and guitarist and mandolinist. There were always city kids looking for escape. Maybe upon word of the Scratch Creek venue more musicians would stay. Brandy and Marissa would design a new backdrop, with help from a designer friend in town. There was ample room for a small parking lot if they only cut down a few more trees, which they did for vegetables so why not music and money. And Nat could even coordinate some farmy buy-our-produce talk or whatever, if she wanted. Because Brandy was coming back, and she would tip the scales. She was one human, but she had power, he believed. Soon after she'd left they had decided consensus to ditch the Scratch Creek Stage, sure. Mark also believed that consensus was sometimes a word winners used to make things sound nice.

And if it didn't work: escape to Nashville, for good. This was the last go.

~

It was the most beautiful part of Lise and Mark's song but nothing Marissa hadn't heard before. The first time they'd practiced it for her she'd smiled big and even got teary, but now with Nat freaking out on her about how messy Brandy was she wanted to get away from all the noise as quickly as possible. And she was annoyed the men had all been out in the woods, and now that they were filtering back in, but only to drink.

I can't be in this place, she said.

What? You aren't leaving anywhere, right?

I mean, Marissa stammered. Everything is irritating me. This conversation. The way I feel. I should be happy.

It's toxic. You know. Can't we just be glad she's back?

I feel so protective. These words clung to Nat's mouth, making it sound like an almost apology. This was a rare move that put Marissa in charge, but she squandered it, nodding and hugging her friend, though it was not lost on her what she'd missed. She excused herself upstairs while finishing the awkward embrace standing over Nat who leaned forward in her chair. So much going unsaid, Marissa knew they both knew.

Like a teenager, Marissa found the objects she had saved in a large snow boot box under her bed in secret, even from Paul. She sat on the cold wooden floor with the last of her wine, crying quietly. Tremendously moved by the way she was now preparing for the event—she did not find any of it predictable, or care if it was—she closed her eyes and hugged herself for a moment.

Under layers of rough flannel she kept for elbow patches, there was the splintered wooden spoon, baby size. It was brittle now, after warping and drying again and again. Brandy had never believed Marissa wouldn't have children. But Marissa had long said no babies and even though Brandy admitted it was she who did want children, the homemade gift had not been so much a joke as an earnest, tender and misguided provision that Marissa had expected to return to her friend, when the time was right.

The broken binoculars, Brandy's great grandfather's, given to Marissa as a birthday gift when she turned twenty one. They were greasy. Marissa looked through them. The view was always the same: blurry.

Yellowed bus tickets from that one trip across the Southwest in the middle of monsoon season where they stumbled upon at a mountain monastery in the Enchanted Circle. The Chinese Buddhist nuns had taken vows of silence. Their first sunny morning there Brandy had hiked them up a treeless hill and when the lightning arrived they lay under squatty junipers in surprise. Brandy had laughed and Marissa had wailed though neither of them could hear anything for the thunder, and after they had survived they trudged down soaked to the nuns' silent chuckling. They had watched the whole thing from their dry and comfortable porch, but had been kind enough to have towels and broth and dumplings waiting. Over the years the memory had taken on mythical qualities in Marissa's mind—We almost died, she liked to say. A bolt three feet to the left!—and she missed that kind of fear and satisfaction. She remembered the fantasy she'd had often for a bit after this, that Brandy had been hit, and Marissa had performed CPR. Sometimes in this daydream, Brandy woke up. Other replays Marissa kept pumping, until she became distracted with something in real life.

By the time Paul tapped the door and walked in, Marissa had stashed these prizes back in their cardboard lair and finished her subdued weeping. She was on to the books. Not her favorites now, but the ones that had formed she and Brandy in their youth, *Living My Life*, *Where there is no Doctor*, *Anarchist Farm*, *Desert Solitaire*, *What Are People For?* and of course *The Country of Marriage*. She had that one open on her lap. What it had felt like to be mad farmers.

Hey, she said looking up a moment.

One hour, Paul replied. He plopped down on their bed.

Marissa traced her fingers along Brandy's smeared penciled notes.

Be joyful/though you have considered all the facts.

Berry's verse, with Brandy's added arrow, and then tiny words, Marissa and Paul.

Look, Marissa said, beckoning Paul over her shoulder, even though she had read these notes over and over through the years. Each time they both stung and comforted. She pointed to the text, and then touched her heart.

We weren't even together then, she said, and Brandy hadn't gone weird yet.

But in the sentiment of everything she said there was a stab of something sick or false. She didn't think Paul could hear it, which heightened the feeling. Oh, she didn't want this to end. She wanted to stick it out, whatever that meant. She couldn't leave her partner in love, partners in business, for some vague sense of adventure, she told herself, too often. Or could she? No, no.

Paul did not respond except to settle on his belly with his head next to Marissa's, and to take her ponytail in his right hand, gently.

She read aloud further down the page—

Go with your love to the fields. /Lie down in the shade. Rest your head/in her lap
—and sighed. Wright, she whispered. Brandy had drawn a heart around these lines.

Oh, said Paul.

Marissa closed the book, placed it back in the neat stack. She climbed atop the bed onto Paul, comfortable Paul, and kissed him on the nose.

This isn't real, she said, but even as she said it she understood that wasn't exactly true. Because what had been more real in her entire life than Brandy? If not for this friend, she would have stayed a little nursing student from the suburbs, never knowing it

was an option to hitchhike or use questionably sourced medicines to heal battered radicals or not get legally married or grow plants for a living or to make a plan and then throw it with gusto right out the damn window.

Paul pulled her closer. She lay her head across his face. They did not move or talk and stayed stacked and still like that for a long time.

~

It was almost time. Mark and Lise continued to play, but they weren't as tight as earlier. They were drunk. Nat settled in on the couch adjacent to their practice and nervously flipped through a large magazine with matte pages called *Harvest Basket Quarterly*. It had arrived earlier in the afternoon. Paul and Marissa walked in and laughed.

Can't get enough of the mocking? Paul said.

Nat shook her head, and set the publication down. There are good business insights, she said.

Marissa picked up *Harvest Basket*, and Paul peered over her shoulder chuckling. She showed her page selection back to Nat. A ruddy bearded man was digging a purple carrot from the earth. His female companion wore a long dark braid and a cornflower blue muslin dress, and held a basket of these roots, which came in orange and yellow too.

Still white, sexist, capitalist, hetero, Nat said, smiling.

Marissa elbowed Paul. But that guy is pretty hot, right?

The hottest.

Ah, but they didn't put the magazine down, and Nat could see their subtle awe. She felt it too, of course. Every several months Nat ordered one as a joke, but then, if

Helen was traveling, would take it up to her room to study as if she was an adolescent girl learning about makeup application and the secrets of kissing boys, things she had never felt the need to do when young. Right before Brandy's letter had arrived, in a desperate moment when Nat had wanted Scratch Creek to go on forever she had even queried—in total shameful solitude, not even Helen knew—about Scratch Creek being featured in an upcoming issue. She'd made a good name for them on internet, but it was time for the next step. And her life, the life of her friends and vegetables and animals, as potential spreads, could—although it was embarrassing—bring in recognition, and what was more, money.

And then it was eight-ten. Except for Wright, they all migrated to the kitchen, near the door that led out to the cars. The wind had picked up and the glass vibrated.

Well, Paul said. Who's on it?

Mark and Lise poured more wine.

Marissa's hands were shaking around a glass of water. Me, she said. I have to.

Do you want me to drive? Nat asked.

I can.

Nat shook her head. Marissa, you're an excellent driver, but you don't seem well at the moment.

Or I can go, Paul offered.

Nat leaned back when he said this. She hoped the message got across this way and that she wouldn't have to use words. She didn't want to drive Marissa to pick up Brandy.

She didn't want to pick up Brandy. She needed every last moment to prepare. Paul

walked over to the key hook by the door, and patted his back pocket as if checking for his wallet. Nat was safe.

After they left, Nat sat back down to the magazine, but was distracted. She—in a sudden shock—wondered about the child’s bedtime, what this would mean. Would they all be forced to quiet after eight? Or would Brandy’s parenting be wilder, Edgar a little lost boy who still happened to have a mother? No option seemed ideal.

Nat motioned for Wright to sit beside her when he slumped down the stairs. He sat across instead, on the raised brick floor around the woodstove. He donned a pilled gray stocking cap and a red flannel, likely the same clothes Brandy had last seen him wear. Nat could tell Wright was just high enough to face the night but that was all. He was not making eye contact and would be sullen and perhaps that was best. He’d ignored suggestions to go into town to see his new girlfriend. Such a child of a man.

Even if this first night went well it was bound to get ugly. Nat was afraid and also, though it shamed her, excited. Something was happening, and she could not deny that she was human and so craved spectacles and disasters.

Nat reached out her hand to Wright. He did not look up but took it. She squeezed it tight, and after a moment, he squeezed back.

~

Marissa and Paul parked the car and waited inside the airport. The flight was delayed, only by a little.

Sounds like we won’t have any tulips for market this weekend, Marissa said.

Paul agreed, then replied, We’ll have to find something else to trade for Kolstad’s good bread.

Should we try cardamom this time instead of cinnamon?

It was all they could talk about.

People began walking from Brandy's gate, and they watched. Marissa and Paul saw her first, when she was still scanning for them. Yellow braids swinging over a long wool cardigan, beige with pink zig zags, the child in a pack on her back, formidable suitcase rolling along behind her outstretched arm.

It's you! Squealed Marissa, leaving Paul behind. She embraced her friend, and after a moment Brandy stepped back and took Marissa's face in her hands, scrutinizing. Paul was not in earshot, but as he looked on he thought he saw Brandy's mouth make the words *you haven't changed*. Or no, that wasn't it. There was no *haven't*. It seemed the obvious filler word, but that's not what she'd said at all.

Chapter Seven: To Edgar

You spread yourself out across your mother's open chest the night she came home to us. Didn't bother to look up. This was not a nursing toddler's quick snack. You suckled one breast, the next, and then again the first as if you were a toothless infant instead of nearly three years old, a hardy child straining greedily for what was left of your mother's thin milk.

Your mother—casual—told us she'd almost had you weaned, until you saw the packed suitcase, stepped in the crowded airport. It was the least she could do now, she explained, though she swatted your small hands when they pumped too furiously. We shrugged, brought her water.

I want to taste the snow again, Brandy said, her head held high. I want to see the northern lights on a freezing night, when everything else is white.

A noblesse home from the global south, making demands on winter. This was not why she was here, and we knew it. Oh, but she drew us in. Her teeth were still big and not quite white and her smile was full and chapped and as happy as we'd hoped. Your mother seemed immune to the creeping in of middle age, laying out her simple goals to us like she had never left. We were aware of the contracting skin around our mouths, and for some of us, the slow silvering of hair at our temples. The way our hands and hearts had begun to resemble leather.

And when it's gone, I'll leave, she continued. I need a year. Just one. I need to work.

We nodded, but we didn't know what was going on. Brandy didn't like employment, and we were in the throes of shock anyway. The sight of her, the likeness in

you. Her suitcase—the same she'd left with—in our living room. A moment of recognition: we'd had it wrong. Our sexy Latin American novel scene, and all the components we'd imagined, tragedies, alpacas, bright birds landing on fruit trees to sing their songs, the gun nightly in her lap. This was a more complicated and less beautiful story we were waiting to hear. That she wasn't telling. But she did pass around a snapshot, a stone house on lush earth, a broad-leafed herb growing up all around it. *Hoja santa*. Tastes like root beer, she said.

We asked how we could help. The words spilled out smoothly, with none of the rancor living inside us. Or they sputtered, and we feared we could not communicate the great love and longing we felt. Or, we said nothing, and listened, or did not listen, but instead wondered how in the world we had gotten here.

And your mother, gingerly and over pronounced, as if to clarify that she was not asking for money, again, replied, I need to work.

Our innards were smug: of course it was about money. Our blood was tender, because once, when we were young, we'd been her friends, good ones. Our eyes were wide. You, the boy! A little one at Scratch Creek! Look at those curling fingers and feet, listen to those tired sighs. Kindness crept up in us, for the small sadness we hid for never having children, or, more generally, for new animal life.

Then, your mother said, Put me to work, and this was different. Oh. She thought we'd become rich. Well.

You finished your long but meager meal and Brandy tucked her nipple back into her blouse, which was of rich material and faded, moth bit. It was beautiful, but also, it meant you were poor, as much as you'd ever been. Perhaps our assumptions about

Hernan were wrong; more likely we understood nothing about your country, or really, about ours. You looked up, at each one of us. Your head was turned, but not your body. It was the first time you'd truly seen us. A kind of electricity. You kept your gaze. We were all waiting.

We talked on and on, but not about work. About love, about plants, gossip, who had married and divorced or ended partnerships, who'd been fired or hired or elected, the seventeen-car pileup that killed a college professor most of us had known, the albino doe that graced the woods behind our home. The crops we'd found most lucrative—garlic, specialty winter squashes, boutique lettuces—and the terrain of her new home—trees we could not remember, gulches and dips and water, water, so much water. The animals she was saving. Certain frogs and birds and yes, jaguars, which were never seen. And the bugs. She rolled up your pant leg, to show us the scars. We talked a lot about bugs.

You thought they were bad here, you don't even know. You have no idea, said your mother, rubbing the patch of your shin that was bumpy and red.

Wright had been sitting on a chair, turned slightly away from the group. Here, he went outside, and we heard his car start.

Soon after: What do you mean, no work? (A new urgency in Brandy's face.)

Of course there's work, we clarified. But not here-here. Not Scratch Creek. Maybe in small towns. Maybe down in the city.

That's an hour, said Brandy, and her expression did not change. Disbelief or unhearing. She fully expected something else, yet we held solid. No. Willed each other to stay strong, if we were listening well.

We don't have any money to pay you.

But all of you are working?

We barely pay ourselves, we whispered, and this was true, but wasn't it also absurd, we pondered. The way we were considered successful among small farms, and yet if we did the math (we had) we were making maybe two dollars an hour.

Still, Brandy's jaw was set, willing us to see things differently.

It's not possible.

In silence Brandy worked out the details in her face. In a flash her sorrow was palpable, and we saw a trace of regret. Except for you, her entire life—whatever that looked like—in a different hemisphere, and now she had to go out and get a bad job.

Later in the night, we asked her about her life.

Some things are too difficult to say, all at once, your mother told us. She smiled, and you went back in to nurse. How strange, to see someone else in charge of her, commandeering and exposing. With your little hand you pumped her slack flesh and then pulled back your moth a bit. Like a cow, or a sheep. No, like a human, a different kind of human. Your mother swat you gently, but besides that did not react.

A diner. Nanny gigs. Barista, bartender, seasonal commercial plant warehouse. A million minimum wage opportunities. Twenty to seventy minutes of driving, no car. This

is why you and your mother had traversed half the globe. You came up for air again and wrinkled your nose, as if you were also evaluating the poor options, surprised at all the opportunity America wasn't, even for someone like Brandy.

If I don't come up with real money, she began. Then she wept.

What, what? Because we couldn't understand.

I need big money. Fast. They want our land. Everybody wants it. We're going to lose it forever.

And so we told her she could borrow our cars. Instead of thank you, your mother asked what she could do with you. She phrased the question like she was asking for daycare, but we knew what she wanted.

Still, we offered, we knew of quality child care options, in town.

If I pay for childcare, I'll have nothing left, and anyway, American daycare will turn him into a robot.

And, we suppose, just because it was nearly two am and we were desperate to tuck both of you in bed—why would neither of you sleep?—we said we'd do it. We'd watch you. The plan was made: your mother would get a serving job, make a hundred bucks a night, and leave you with us, the childless-by-choice farmers of Scratch Creek. He's a great sleeper, your mother said, though you were not sleeping. We thought on all we had done to prevent seed from fertilizing egg. What a joke.

You are saving my life, said your mother. Our life. You have no idea.

You did not smile. You did not comprehend most of what we said, but you saw through something in us. When we handed you a plate of crackers and cheese, with a cry you flipped it and pawed again at your mother's buttons.

Within a week, your mother had her job, at a hip new diner called Whiskey Biscuit which often bought our vegetables. We loaded up whatever car she borrowed when she went to work, which was almost every day. And then we looked to you, wondering what to do.

Some of us thought you were an angel. Beautiful boy. But others, we weren't thrilled about you. You crushed four feet of greenhouse mizuna, and laughed. You defecated in the radishes, and when outside the chicken house, you scowled, poking your finger through wire, pouting *Nuestra gallinero es más grande*. Of course, you were a child, really still a baby. But that's why we didn't have babies.

We were in love, immediately, some of us. We would not love you, we also told ourselves. You were the costly antithesis of everything we had worked to achieve. And yet, we couldn't deny that you were Brandy's child, and because of the woman we had once known and loved, perhaps our hearts were not safe.

Flowers bloomed, sun bloomed. In years past, we'd rarely slept in the summers. With you around, our exhaustion intensified.

You liked to stand in the kitchen garden well beyond bedtime, picking at aging turnip tops, and staring up at the late-night gold-blue sky. Sometimes, we chased you down, and other times, we let you stay up and point, as long as you wanted.

¿A dónde fue la luna? ¿A dónde fue la luna?

How strange. In one flight, your world had transformed. It was enough to lose your fruit trees and language and people and tropical heat, we figured, but here even the sky was different.

The summer greened, prepared to peak. By this time, we fit you into our lives like it was nothing. These were uneventful times, in a good way, at least it seemed then. The weather was nice enough and you were a child already accustomed to playing (alone, so alone) outdoors. We saw Brandy and also ourselves in you, tanned and skinned kneed, chasing small creatures and picking flowers, battling trees with fallen branches. We swelled with pride over the childhood we were giving you. We reminded ourselves: it takes a village. We were impressed with ourselves for this. Our education garden became your sandbox, and in it you raised your own farm. Slugs and grasshoppers, lopped flower tops, their remaining stems, shoved into mud, with transplanting in mind. In one hole, a thousand expired turnip seeds. Many sprouted, and they grew until they faded into yellow white, strangling each other. A thick and twisting turnip, woody from the start, persisted.

For a few weeks, we relaxed into the busy but joyful rush of the season. The farm was our life and that was fine, we told ourselves. Most of us wanted to fly away, but those details were still unformed and it was like we had agreed, in silence, to leave it be, for a bit longer.

As for your mother, she surprised us. During this time, she worked and worked, and never complained. She picked up an extra job at the medicinal pot farm right over the county line, too. She was always gone, and you formed attachments to us, but you loved her just the same. Sometimes we drank coffee or wine with her late at night, after her

shifts, but most days we barely knew she was there except for the cereal bowl left in the sink, the moth-bit cardigan spread out across a couch. But these things, and the fact that at most times one of us was putting every task and hope on hold to watch you, didn't really bother us. After all these years we were so happy to see Brandy setting a goal, and reaching for it. For once the grim imperfections, the broken systems did not leave her heart immobile, did not cause her body to run.

Now, she put in her cog time each day. Being a cog is easier when you have a grand plan, when you feel deep down that you are the one besting the machine. She never went off gathering wild food, never dwelt on the swiftly passing season, what could have been. She worked for a paycheck, and tips, that was all.

Here was this woman responsible for our long-gone bloody curling iron poster, our never-realized wild crafting sub organization, our most militant moments, ironing an oxford shirt, a clean black apron. Here she was, after splashing her face with drugstore witch hazel, applying mascara, pulling her hair back into a tight ponytail. She used our shampoo, without asking or replacing. We would let it pass. Here she was (usually) not forgetting to fill our cars with gas.

Yes, we were pleased, with everything. Yes, it was too good to be true.

PART III

Chapter Eight: From the leather-bound journal of the editor of *Harvest Basket Quarterly*

Before the year is over, my wife and I will leave Brooklyn, to find a new rural America armed with our cameras, our questions, our perceptions.

I'm drawn north, to one farm in particular, a place my intuition tells me is rich with a fusion culture. Essence: earthen tendencies, clean efficient lines. Textiles of wool, jute, dyed primary colors. Furry hoods, drawn close to hooded eyes, prominent cheekbones. Worn boots, dangling earrings of birch bark and red beads.

In white ceramic bowls, I want to see puddings of wild rice, alpine blueberries, maple syrup, topped with imported pistachios, the crushed seeds of cardamom pods. The embers of last night's fire whispering a promise, a warning. Sitting on a damp stump in the cold morning light, speaking of modest things in hushed tones, palming the thick slice of black bread. Juusta melted atop, and the viscous drizzle of a native berry, the brightest red. Served with strong black coffee in the speckled blue camping mug. I can feel it on my dew-cooled skin.

Day after day, here, the work is hard, unrelenting, but there are stuffed pumpkins, fermented fish topped with sprigs of dill, nightly teas steeped in the spindly needles of evergreens. I want to feel the lightness of their wooden canoes on shallow gray lakes, goldenrod and teal mosses on jagged rocks, home apothecaries, strong scents and lines of amber and blue jars, living rooms of books, pianos, violins.

These people, their long braids are streaked blonde, their hands are strong and calloused because they cut the wood to keep their homes warm, in this different America. This is a land touched by the Aurora Borealis. The magic of the green-purple spectacle runs in their blood, and I want it to run in mine too.

Chapter Nine: Past Ripe

One afternoon between harvesting and dinner prep, Nat sat down on the couch, across from Helen who was curled up on the rocking chair reading a novel, to check her email. Before she opened the laptop, she overheard Marissa and Brandy on the porch.

Brandy said, There's so much more.

Oh, I want to know. Everything. Let's go get coffee tomorrow, before your shift. I'll drive you.

Nat looked up and caught Helen's eye. Helen shrugged. What did they expect to hear? Nat had guessed some sort of political subversion, Helen, love affairs. The two wondered together often. While this was juicy, it saddened Nat. Where was their own adventure? The coming weekend, Helen would leave again, for another big city, while Nat, no longer so young, stayed behind to work. Helen returned to her book, burying her face in almost unnaturally deep, and took a sip of her tea, which smelled strongly of licorice root.

Nat's found her browser littered with job descriptions. Librarian needed. Minneapolis. Burlington. Bellingham. Boulder. More. She looked up again, and Helen seemed to retreat further into the paperback, twirling a long strand of her gray-streaked auburn hair. The smallest curl of a bottom lip. And Nat remembered the conversation they'd had the night before, when Nat had complained of Helen's leaving, even though it was part of the deal. And Helen's words, a statement, and then a question:

I don't think I can do another winter here. I think I've got to get out of here, with or without you.

Do we still hate marriage, now that we're allowed?

That's as far as the conversation had gone; someone downstairs needed help with Edgar and nervous Nat had been happy to oblige.

Marissa and Brandy's voices cut through Nat's thoughts again.

You guys should come back with me. You'd love it. No more winters.

It really does sound like paradise. I've been thinking about, you know, what if I tried nursing again, traveling nursing. I mean, I don't know.

We could build you a bungalow. Your own house, for whenever you came to work, and we'd fill it with baskets of fruit!

Nat continued to stare at her computer screen and looked up when she felt Helen's stare. Helen had put the novel down on her lap, and her eyebrows were raised. Nat sucked in her breath. There was expectation between them. Nat looked into her partner's face. The curl was a full smile now.

Helen mouthed, Things are changing, and the room then burgeoned with a new fullness. They had never married, and maybe never would, but weren't they fulfilling its wildest promises anyway, the possibility of old lovers to surprise one another? And somewhere in this giddiness and newness was direction, she knew.

The jobs Helen had picked out were full time, well paying, and all places Nat had mentioned where interesting grad programs existed. But she wasn't going back to school, she'd often said. She was too old, or too rooted, or too partnered to the joy of mundane physical tasks, her animal life, and of course, Scratch Creek, her creation. But now, when Helen had laid out a trap, Nat had fallen right in, with joy. The fight was over.

Nat looked up some university websites, sustainable agriculture community development this and that. Typed in letters, numbers. Clicked, checked, yes, yes, yes,

send me more info. Tell me everything. Bought a GRE study book. Felt her heart leap. And drop. Didn't clear her search history. Didn't give a damn who might borrow her computer and see. That her life—that all of their lives—were works in progress, that little fields of vegetables or their smart but homemade chicken tractors and their shaded boxes of eggs, their complicated but lovely household were not ends but jumping-off points, and that was all okay.

Nat heard Marissa say, Brandy, it sounds perfect.

Brandy replied, And Paul, he'd love it. The villages always need teachers, and they love learning English.

Marissa's words were muffled by passing geese, or, she did not say anything. Something disconcerting here. Nat looked up to Helen again, and though there was so much to say about the life they were going to forge, she saw this too piqued Helen. But of course Marissa loved Paul.

Then, Brandy: someone has to leave first.

Nat did not know over which partnership Brandy prophesied.

Footsteps, hushed tones, a conversation change, it was clear. Edgar was there, describing in English-specked Spanish something exciting. Marissa seemed to be walking away, calling back, I'll take you in to town, tomorrow, yeah?

Barely looking, Nat kept clicking. Almost frantic. Send me brochures. Call me. Email me. I'm yours.

Nat, said Helen, finally.

Yes. This was to everything Nat figured she could possibly be asked by the one she loved most.

I do love you, very much.

The ball was in motion. Scratch Creek was ending.

Then Nat remembered why she'd sat down, to check her email, which would draw her back into the minutiae of the place, the small motions that paid them pennies, day after day. And then there was a message: RE: HARVEST BASKET QUARTERLY FARM SELECTION. Oh. What. What was this? She eyed the last issue, hanging off the coffee table, wet brown ring in its center.

She read on. They wanted her. They wanted them. Well, probably. They were making final selections. Four page spreads. It would be huge. But, they wanted to know, how were they distinctive? What was a practice that made them more than a farm, but an extension of the landscape? It was not enough to grow food; how did they themselves grow out of the place? Nat shook her head, imagined herself and her friends in new ways: feet as twisting roots, arms as branches, heads bobbling with fruit ready to be plucked, guts spangled with squash and tomatoes, pods of peas. And then another thing: They wanted to see the farm, the farmers, in every season. They'd start in the autumn, come back the dead of winter, spring, and then of course next summer. A page for each. Nat considered next winter: in a tiny apartment, shared with Helen, above a city's bright rumble, or Scratch Creek in the snow, but this time without Helen. Ah, but the money. The recognition. The catapult it would be. For all of them, if they could stomach it, if they could get over their side-stitching laughter to see Nat's face not change, and say: Seriously, we're doing this?

Nat said to Helen, I need to take a walk. She got up to go outside, hoping that Helen would be troubled, not quite able to slide back into somebody else's narrative.

Beyond the porch Brandy was helping her son up a tree, coaching him in soft Spanish. Nat waved to her, and then walked out into the fields, to lap Scratch Creek. Could they withstand another year, or would they burst, first? And what made them different? Anything? And deeper than all of this was the truth Nat knew, understood all her farm mates believed, that a force like *Harvest Basket Quarterly* at best cheerfully infantilized, at worst exploited, all the ways people could connect and relate to land.

When Nat was across the farm, she heard Edgar's shrill yelp. There he was, a tiny collection of limbs, stuck on a wobbling branch. Brandy was not tall enough to help him down, but over jaunted Wright, who rarely was seen with Brandy or Edgar. He whisked the boy to safety. Nat took out her phone, and took a picture of the three of them. That was the essence *Harvest Basket* wanted, and although Nat did not believe Brandy would ever commit to Wright, didn't the small gesture make Nat happy, too? Nat heard no words from where she wandered the berry vines, sampling, brain a mess with different versions of the future. She did see Brandy's body express a very deep thank you. Wright shrugged, and the chemistry was there. She snapped another photo, which she would one day zoom in on and enlarge and print, and then save, though it was grainy and pixelated, always. The three people lingered. These were things she wanted people to see, and also she wanted to scoop up her world with a spoon and eat it, to keep it safe, forever.

Marissa looked up from where she was washing market carrots in the two-walled harvesting shack behind the house. On the back porch, Edgar, who had been pushing around a plastic and metal dump truck, was now ramming it against the old wooden door. It was late. Next to her, Paul bundled Chioggia beets.

I guess we better take him in, he said.

Marissa sighed.

You sound frustrated.

Marissa waved her hand over their produce. This has to get done. I don't know why we're on duty market eve. Prep rides on us, and everybody knows it. And for once we have plans in town, which we're going to be late for.

So you or me this time?

Marissa crossed her arms, gave him a look that was not an answer. Paul looped a rubber band one too many times. It snapped against his reddened hand. He shrugged then.

I know, I know, Marissa said, rolling her eyes. Like it's ever convenient for anyone.

I can do it.

No, no, I'm up.

She left her carrots for Paul. She tensed her back as she stepped through the dewy grass that led up to the porch, waiting for something to hit between her shoulder blades. Ahead, Marissa saw Edgar look up, size up the bedtime situation, and sprint down from the porch, out into the kitchen garden. Paul whooped from the shack.

He liked Edgar a lot, Marissa knew. In bed at night, he would flip through a Spanish workbook to better communicate with the boy. She felt his absence, when in the extra time they usually would have spent together, he was building a swing, a slide, a tiny fort. Paul often invited Marissa into these activities; they did not soothe her need to wander.

Oh, Marissa wasn't sure what Paul would say to her if he was to speak his mind, completely. It had been her call, really, to not have children, and they had since been very skilled at contraception.

Marissa saw Edgar tense when she came close, and then he cried out in Spanish that she could not understand, except for the no no no, and again ran. She followed a few steps, but she didn't want to trample the soil, the leggy and fragrant fennel and dill. She stayed still a moment, to let the child calm down, and he resumed his solitary playing. Marissa looked back. There Paul worked as if he'd not been interrupted. It had been a terrible and cold spring and he along with all of the farmers had worked hard for those root vegetables. She remembered the day many of them were planted. A local school had toured our farm, and Paul had led the squirmy children around, and sprinkled expired seeds into their small pink hands for them to plant, willy-nilly, in the ten-by-ten plot that was soon after given to Edgar. Then after they left, he joined the rest of the farmers seeding again, which was exact and tedious and froze the fingers.

Marissa could not see Paul well now in the dim light. She was proud of him and this work they did together, and she loved him, but it also seemed a decision to think those things. No welling up of spontaneous emotion. No deep excitement. Where satisfaction should have been, a numbness. The question in her, always now: ride it out?

She turned back to Brandy's son.

Edgar, let's have a snack, okay? ¿Quieres-un-bocadillo?

Edgar froze, and then turned, slowly. It was still light out, but the sun and the shadows were gone. Night was coming on rapidly. He was far enough away that Marissa had trouble making out his face, and could not decide if he was ready to surrender. A

phrase she had told Paul, years ago—We have important work to do that is not rearing a child—danced through her head. If this was true—she did believe it was, still—was that important work really a sagging shed full of roots? Was that all?

Or, seeing Paul smitten in the last couple months, could she imagine a life for herself where that important work could have happily been the child raising? She had long accepted boredom as a part of a good life. She appreciated her steady days with Paul, and the rest of Scratch Creek, the sorting and washing for market, of course, and ripe, past-ripe berries would not crush and can themselves into jam. And wasn't it also valuable to sit on the porch swing for few minutes before bed, and read a book, or sit in silence?

After a long consideration, Edgar giggled at Marissa's belabored Spanish. Then, she wondered in fondness, and grief, if back in Venezuela Brandy had ever told him, or Hernan, about her. If Hernan knew the college antics she'd been roped into by Brandy, or if Edgar had ever heard the name *Tia Marissa* thrown around here and there. If Marissa was insane enough to follow Brandy home to her almost war zone, if the place would be expecting her.

No, Marissa thought. I don't think so.

And Marissa didn't know much about Hernan, either, except: he liked reggae, thought tattoos were irresistible, had a bad temper, was marvelous at sex, had no money and was working eighteen hour days on their diversified farm-turned-nature-preserve. And—this was important—he was in a politically impossible place—publicly decrying wealthy cattle ranchers, the class of which he'd been spawned, the white people with big guns, but also he wanted to keep his land, and so was no friend to the desperate and

abused campesinos who wanted land and safety and a chance in a country where finally, finally the government was, apparently, on their side.

(It's very complicated, Brandy had said in the coffee shop weeks earlier, though it struck Marissa that it was probably quite simple to the campesinos involved. They *should* have land, Brandy had continued. But not *mine*. Marissa had become lost in thought about what health problems might plague the peasant farmers, and how she could help.)

All this about Hernan *and* he was fucking a younger Argentinian volunteer, a little sprite of a post doc who traveled from organic farm to organic farm in, what Brandy had called, eating the foam stick-tip by stick-tip off her cappuccino, *putrid privilege*. And Brandy? Annoyed, but also, she didn't care. Monogamy-schmonogamy. Monogamy wasn't the same as faithfulness, she said. Till death do us part, now that was really what mattered. A speedbump, really, in a vast and wonderful marriage and life. That's what Brandy told Marissa, at least.

So because of the facts of Brandy and Hernan's lives, here was Marissa, corralling a small child out of the garden. She told herself the sooner he was asleep, the sooner market prep would be over, the sooner she and Paul would be driving into town, to the brewery to see Mark and Lise perform, to catch up with good friends. To warm Edgar's heart and draw him nearer, Marissa exaggerated her bad pronunciation. The standoff had to end. ¿Qui-er-es-un-boc-a-dill-o? Por-fa-vor?

He laughed louder and she took a step, and then two, towards him. When she almost had Edgar in her arms, he realized her intention and collapsed into the moist earth, back arching. Marissa scooped him up, not missing a beat.

He screamed like he was being tortured. All spring and summer, whenever he did this, the farmers whispered amongst themselves how relieved they were they'd never plunged into parenting, and Marissa chuckled and rolled her eyes and agreed. Oh, she meant it. But other times the joke nagged at her, a private falsehood staining her integrity, because Paul did not mean it, she knew in her gut, in a sick way, and her life was tethered to his. When she saw Paul with Edgar, beaming, she wondered if it had been fair to worry so much about her independence, when it seemed so obvious now Paul would be the parent to remember doctor's appointments, buy new shoes, brush tiny teeth.

Part of her wanted to hold him, the little babe, kiss his forehead and scrunch his curls, because whether she wanted children or not, she felt for him. But also, Marissa wanted to drop him back into the dirt. This horrified her; she didn't know until later that happy mothers also often felt this way.

Paul left the shack to help. He reached Edgar just as he sank his fingernails into Marissa's cotton-sleeved forearm. Paul put the boy over his shoulder.

Stupid Brandy, Marissa thought. Stupid Hernan. Stupid us.

She was thankful for Paul, then, but thought him just as stupid. Maybe the most stupid.

Paul took him inside, and a bit later, Marissa went to check on them. She wanted to get going. They were sitting on the couch together. Edgar drank from a sippy cup and chewed on yeasty buttered toast, and Paul, who was sitting in an aura of satisfaction, read a storybook about a young lion who needed help sleeping. Marissa crept by, to knock on Nat's door, to tell her she was on Edgar duty in ten minutes.

Within an hour, Paul and Marissa were in town, watching their friends play the songs they had for too long known by heart. The brewery's acoustics were bad, and the furniture uncomfortable—it was not their usual haunt—and Marissa felt disoriented. In the low light, she saw Paul off in the distance, watching. She walked up to him, and rested her hand on the small of his back while looking out over the crowd, up at the stage. Then, something felt off, and she turned to see that Paul was not Paul but a man of similar stature.

Oh, no, no, I'm sorry, exclaimed Marissa, backing away, laughing. I thought you were my partner.

He smiled. A slightly open mouth, a strange spark, an invitation. What? Over the years, she'd had a few exchanges like this, without consequence. Couldn't remember who, where.

And who was the man? One she recognized, but barely knew, had met a few times, maybe. A Gregory? Adam? They began to talk, which jogged her memory. He was an E.R. doctor, transplanted from the Pacific Northwest, a climbing enthusiast. Had traveled Patagonia. Married to a teacher, couple kids (the wife was not there). Early forties. Asked her tons of questions, too. None of the words exchanged mattered, and nothing was suggested, only felt. But what was felt, electric. After a time, they parted. He touched Marissa's arm, like he didn't want to go. She did not want him to go, either.

Attraction to lots of people was normal, she knew. But at some point years earlier, Marissa and Paul had created a rubric for their love, with faithfulness a thing measured by not having sex with other people.

This was an unexpected new craving, for at least one night, to be single again, and for the handsome doctor to be single, too! She imagined her life differently, wondered what it would feel like to be the mature but still young woman she was—not a grungy early twenties radical, giggling drunk at piñatas bursting with condoms, throwing around words, for a short time, like pansexual—meeting this man. They might exchange numbers. Or talk until dawn, on a quiet balcony. They would consummate the chemistry, of course.

Oh, but Marissa, standing frozen watching Mark get sloppy at the mic and Lise squint her eyes shut as she played her bass, considered being who she was now, and fucking the guy anyway. She played it again and again her mind, and it went further, to the two of them traveling the world providing medical care, still fucking. When she almost couldn't breathe, she crept back into a corner to sit down on a bench, unsure of what had just taken over her brain.

Soon, Paul found her, handing her a short beer, too foamy, too light. He bent down to kiss her head.

This place sucks, huh?

Marissa nodded, and scooted over at his urging. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, nuzzled his head for a moment into her neck. For years, Marissa had not noticed the great weight of attachment. Always, she'd felt her burdens lighter because of Paul, but now, the heaviness beside her was unpleasant. Suffocating. Still, she did not move. She breathed in his warmth, with sex and escape and the doctor's firm back still on her mind. After a few minutes, the desperation faded. It was not unpleasant to sit near her partner. The sense of weight, however, remained.

There was never enough time for music.

Mark cracked open his second beer and watched Edgar ignore the pots-and-pans drum set he'd assembled for the child. It was a weekday, not yet lunch. He'd been out in the fields until ten the night before, and that morning since six. Busy season, between the chickens' intense thirst, the pole beans coming on and getting starchy fat before they could harvest them, the urgency in which autumn root seeds and transplants needed to be bedded into the ground. All hands on deck. In an hour, it would be time to heat up the stockpot of leftover soup, and slice and broil bread slices, assemble a salad with whatever was too ugly to be sold, wilting in the fridge. And his knee was throbbing, nothing new.

Lise walked in the room, to her bass.

You shouldn't be drinking this early, she said. Then she disappeared into the kitchen. Mark heard low cursing about the dishes. When she came back she poured from his beer can into a chipped mug.

I'm neutralizing this situation.

Lise brought the mug to her stained lips. Below her, Edgar only wanted Mark's banjo. Mark shrugged, and gave it to him.

Bebé shark, bebé shark, seeming-in-de-water, he sang while smacking the instrument, which Mark promptly retrieved.

Whoa, whoa, not that like, no, you just need to play the drums little dude, we need a drummer.

Edgar whined, Quiero jugar bebé shark en su banjo.

Lise offered, Maybe we shouldn't try to combine practice and kid time.

She sat down on a rug and opened her arms. Edgar collapsed into her lap, complaining still. Mark took a very long drink, watching his girlfriend tousle the boy's hair with affection. He played a short riff from a new song, and made a thinking face.

Should we watch him while I'm electrifying fences? Or spraying neem?

Lise rolled her eyes. Mark felt foolish, but only a little. He knew by then it was unwise to want to recreate the magic that he thought Brandy might provide them. He wanted to anyway. He'd expected more, in a selfish way, from Brandy's return. But she was working all the time, making that money she had once detested instead of investing in the all but dead alternative aspects of the Scratch Creek community she had in the past championed. And this disappointment made Mark question, seriously, why, exactly, he was still there.

Shaaaaaaaark!

Jesus Christ, sighed Mark. Then he left for the kitchen, fiddled around in the pantry, came back with a mug of his own. But he did play the requested song. Edgar jumped up to dance. Lise laughed, and strummed along in the low register the simple song required.

Baby shark do do, do do do do. Baby shark do do, do do do do, they sang. It was fun, for Edgar. It was not magical. Dread was a sticky blob spreading around the room, stuffing itself into Lise and Mark's open mouths, down into their lungs, their hearts.

In a break, Lise quickly finished her beer, while Mark rambled through a later verse neither of them really knew. Something about a surfer getting chomped. Edgar was on the drums now. She tipped out her mug to Mark, who nodded.

Policy, she said, and walked over to the coffee table, pouring into her cup the dark liquid that had filled Mark's. He saw on her face regret. He didn't know if he cared. He needed something to get through these days.

It's time to go to Nashville, he thought. It's finally time. It's past time. He could not shake this thought. Nat had called an emergency house meeting for that night, said she had an important proposition. He would tell everyone then, about Nashville. He would tell Lise, after lunch.

Lise joined back in the song, which was becoming more of a nautical-themed medley. Baby Beluga. Little fish. Weeks before they'd not remembered these songs had even existed.

Mark watched his partner close her eyes and jam like she meant it to the idiotic little tune. Ah, he loved her, he did. The skill with which she played. Her kindness. The slip of stomach that came and went. The hair he wanted to get his hands into. The shared pensiveness. The hope of somewhere else, where they would be just as poor but in the glow of warm sun and good music and well-lit stages. Yes, Nashville.

Edgar danced around the room. After a while, others came in, and Edgar beckoned them over, and after a bit Edgar was holding hands and jumping around in a circle with Nat, Helen, Marissa and Paul, who brought in a box of child's instruments Mark had never seen before. Everyone there but Wright and Brandy. Mark's spirits raised in the presence of these people, and he felt a nice daytime drunk. He leaned over and whispered into Lise's ear.

Nashville! Let's go!

Nobody else heard. Lise looked up, not with a smile, but with alarm, though she did not shake her head no. Lise was intuitive, and he could tell she was taking the three words he'd shouted very, very seriously. And then Mark felt afraid, because he did love Lise and yet he did not know what it meant to be coupled with her outside of the tight hug of Scratch Creek.

~

Brandy leaned into Wright's car speaker to better hear the public radio station which was breaking up as they drove through a thick stand of forest, between the pot farm and Scratch Creek. This was the first time Wright had driven her, since she had returned.

What did you expect?

He'd warned her it would be impossible to discern anything through the static. She'd insisted she could hear fine enough in everyone else's cars.

It's just so calm, Brandy said. No accusations. No speeches. Lots of dissent. Even the bad news sounds like flowers. I can't get enough of it.

Wright mumbled, I dunno. I've given up. The static drives me nuts.

Sounds like a pretty good excuse for apathy, there.

She tapped his knee as she said this, and he could feel her looking at him, demanding his eye contact, even though he was driving. He complied.

For weeks now, Wright had been doing what he could to expand the brief encounters he had with Brandy, like at the fridge or on the porch, without seeming too obvious. He'd even broken it off with the woman in town, no explanation. He was not lying when she asked if he'd taken up with the old, prodigal girlfriend. No, they'd hardly

been alone together. In fact, it often felt like it was Brandy who wanted to invite him for a walk in the woods, or to drive her in to town, but he was afraid, and resisted. But yes, Wright had made the solitary decision to give it one more go, had come to terms that a decade later, he was still in love. Sometimes he wondered if his private pursuance was making an idiot out of him, but then when Marissa hinted that Hernan was having an affair, Wright volunteered to drive Brandy to her pot farm one morning, saying something about having business over there, at a nearby farm.

And now in the car on the way back he was thankful for oncoming traffic as an excuse to look back to the road. He was afraid of all the truths that might fall out of his mouth if he looked at her too long, and he'd told himself he would keep the waters calm until the time was right. There was so much that needed saying.

This movement is not going away, claimed the radio interviewee in a few seconds of clarity. But then, the static exploded. Brandy hit the plastic dash and they lost it completely.

She sighed and clicked off the radio.

Hernan and I, we thought if we just did our work and were good family people and ignored everything long enough it would go away. We were white and modest and stayed out of the way. Now, I wish we'd done *something* politically. Maybe someone would want to do us favors if that were the case. We should've tried harder to align, I guess. Or, I wish the campesinos could see us for the exception we are.

There was none of this Wright wanted to hear. He stayed silent.

Maybe, said Brandy, you should be taking my words as a warning.

Excuse me? Wright said, startled. He turned from the main highway onto the smaller route that would lead them back home in a few more miles. What could ‘Hernan’ and ‘warning’ be doing in the same conversation?

Brandy’s reply was quick, tinged with fire. I mean, you pretend that the country isn’t full of public unrest. What makes you so sure it’s not going to affect you, eventually?

Brandy, what are you talking about? Wright asked, in earnest. Sure, he’d heard about protests and such, further south or east or west, or up in Canada, or bad cops and right-wing nuts waving their guns and scary politicians promising all kinds of evil, but the way she said the words *public unrest* made it sound like one morning he was going to wake up to the sleepy farm roads barricaded with SWAT teams.

Erresistentzia, she said. She savored the word, in an exaggerated way.

Huh?

Resistance Farm, ha, she replied. Remember that? You suggested it that one day. Nat wouldn’t have it. So terrified of government surveillance.

I don’t—

But we’ve never been resisting anything here. Nothing real, at least. That doesn’t mean there isn’t anything to fight.

Wright shook his head. He mumbled, We’re farmers. We farm.

Must be nice to say that so casually. Now I might find myself murdered for eighty acres. The campesinos I say I support might even be the ones to do it, while Hernan’s paramilitary cousins and uncles will use my murder as a cry for war, my fair-skinned

body as a symbol for righteous violence. Or more likely, they'll kill me themselves, blame the Indians still. Just saying, things can change.

It chilled him, the twists she was taking and her indulgence in the thought of her own self murdered. He saw blood on her mouth, and blinked hard. Not that he took her seriously. Scratch Creek and all that was around it was different than the goddamn Venezuela/Columbia border of all places.

All he could say was, Nobody would murder you, Brandy.

She laughed, shook her head, and cupped her left hand, which to Wright, was electric, around his bent right elbow.

Even after hearing from Marissa that Hernan had a side lover, Wright didn't know the rules of Brandy's marriage, and he was not sure he cared. Marriages could end. They drove by a casino, and behind the roadside woods flashed the dull beige siding of a few reservation buildings, and Wright remembered when he was anarchist and regularly thought about these things—justice, disenfranchisement—considered these campesinos Brandy talked about, and why in the northern hemisphere if he didn't think about it too hard he could rest easy knowing he owned his land, and how complicated the world was. All of it. The woman touching his arm, now.

She let go then which to Wright felt like a crumpling motion. Up ahead was the little country road market. Let's stop here, he said. I need to buy cigarettes, and Marissa asked for pectin.

Berry season marches on, Brandy said absently, as if she was reminding herself of rhythms she had forgotten. At home, it's lulo and granadillo season right now. I can't believe I'm missing it.

Wright pulled off the road. The way she said *home*. He wondered what else Brandy had forgotten that he would have figured written into her soul.

The cashier was ringing up the cigarettes when Brandy came back with the pectin and a box of cheap chocolate peanut butter wafer bars. Wright laughed. Before she'd left, she liked to make a show of snubbing refined sugar.

They have these at home, Brandy whined, her smile guilty. There it was again, *home*, Wright lamented while getting out the cash. Home was away now, with Hernan, the father of her child. Brandy did not offer any money, and was ripping open cardboard and then plastic before Wright could finish the transaction.

Outside the store, Brandy told Wright she was going to eat half the box and smoke one of his cigarettes, but they had to do it there because she didn't want Edgar to see. She shrugged when Wright suggested Mark and Lise might be anxious to go off childcare, and then turned and started walking.

I have to turn right around and go serve this afternoon anyway, and, it's good for them, she called out, mouth full. Edgar loves their music.

Wright was pleased that Brandy still remembered the narrow boardwalk over the creek in the strip of woods behind this market. He took satisfaction in how she noticed the more recent broken down state and mossy slickness. Perhaps she had not forgotten everything. She held a cigarette between her lips, which she met to his lighter.

Wright relished the quiet between them that he knew would not last. Already, she was clearing her throat.

You're kind of awkward with me now.

Wright ignored her – there was so much to say! She had no idea, the decisions he had made around her, even in the last week. He looked out beyond where they stood, to the green field of swails and coolies. And egret rested near a few cows. The days had stopped growing longer, but did not yet seem to be shrinking, and the earth hummed warmth. Tomatoes were not quite red and the goldenrod stalks not full flower. But that would come soon, and then when it did, summer would end. Brandy had pledged herself until the following spring, yet Wright felt the constriction of unfulfilled desire as if she would leave at the first sight of a falling leaf, even if it was mostly green. Unless he acted.

Brandy dropped the wafer box and bit her lip. She said, When are you going to act more natural around me? Every time I try to hang out with you, you shut down.

I thought we could be friends after all this time, she continued. Wright focused on the elegant egret. He could be that bird, he decided.

Will you please fucking say something? She demanded this now, and touched him again, this time by the arms near his biceps, with both of her hands, letting her half-smoked cigarette fall in the slow creek.

He reeled back, but not enough to break her grip.

Something! he yelled, like an adolescent, and she rolled her eyes and tightened her fingers.

I'm not bullshitting you, Wright. It's like you're mad at me for ten years ago. Can we just say what we need to say?

I miss you, Wright said, succumbing to her stubborn glare. What were the next words after these? He searched his scrambled brain for the language that he had let decay soon after Brandy had left the continent. How to say what he meant, but not scare her?

She moved closer. Wright wracked his years of imaginings about her life, searching for the thing to say that was apt and mature. It did not come. She put her hand in his.

What I did not know then but know now is that there is more than one way to love a person, people, Brandy said. Strange that it's a lesson from marriage, after the way we were as kids, though maybe not.

Wright sensed that what she was saying did not bode well for their future, but also, she moved closer still, and so he would not listen to his gut feeling about what she wanted but only the burn of what he wanted, and he touched her face, and she leaned into it, and then they kissed.

It was not hungry the way Wright had hoped, but their lips made contact, and this was something. Brandy smiled up at him, then laid her face against his chest.

After this, he could not help himself, and said, I turned down a job interview yesterday. I think I would have gotten the job. It's exactly what I wanted, but, now that you're here.

What? Brandy let go of him, and backed away.

It just seems crazy—I mean, how could I go now, to a different time zone, when finally, you're back?

Whoa, that is not the vibe I've been getting from you.

It's so hard to express. I haven't wanted to be overbearing.

Oh Wright, Wright, Wright, haven't you been listening? That no matter what happens here, I'm going back to Hernan, to our land? Why do you think I'm working these shit jobs? I'm serious.

But Marissa said...

What did she say?

That he's cheating.

She said those words? Cheating?

Sure. I don't know.

Well, that's not what I said. Having sex with someone else doesn't have to mean cheating, if we're open. And we're open. I just can't believe I'm having to explain that to you. I can't believe we're even having this conversation. That I'm working my ass off to save my land in a place where people are fucking disappearing and showing up dead with a million bullet holes and you're concerned how my husband conducts his penis.

Wright stepped back too. This was not what he'd expected.

Look, that's horrible, about the violence. Really goddamn horrible. I'm so sorry. I can't imagine. Once again, you've experienced more thoughts and feelings than anyone around you.

Yep, this was exactly what I was waiting for. The *Brandy is a drama queen* line from you, from every one. Awesome. Why the fuck am I even here? Nobody believed in me then, and not now, even though I've spent my last decade *also* building up a project, and one, that frankly, I find a whole lot more interesting than your fucking cookie cutter Scratch Creek. Zombies, all of you. Felt like crawling into a mausoleum in my twenties and you know what, still does. I thought we could be on the same page, make this

interlude meaningful, but I guess I'm just going to keep my head down, go to work, and not expect anything else.

Brandy was yelling now. The air was cool next to Wright's body where Brandy had stood, so close, moments before. The market's air conditioning buzzed loudly, but for anyone between their cars and the grocer's door, they were putting on a show, Wright was sure.

This conversation needs to be over, he announced, quietly. His threat was empty. He began walking into the field, away from the store and his car.

What are you suggesting, Wright? Brandy called out after him. He kept moving, and she followed a couple steps. The cattle, who had been watching intently, trotted away to maintain their distance. The egret prepared for flight.

But soon Wright heard only his feet in the grass. When he turned, Brandy was far off and walking back to the parking lot, wafer box under her arm. Lise and Mark needed to be relieved of Edgar, Nat had said something about a house meeting and he didn't remember when it was set for, and anyway, he didn't know how to answer her question. By the time he reached the car, she was sitting inside.

He was uncomfortable in the small space with Brandy. But it was a moving box, and with each landmark—the blue barn, the ancient oak, the permanently Christmas-themed mailbox—it became easier to breathe. The crisis was deflating, he believed, just the way he liked it.

They could hear the music, all at once jazzy and folksy, catchy and dissonant, refined and chaotic, halfway up the drive. Lise and Mark, of course. Brandy put her head in her hands.

Wright strained; something sounded off. He could tell that it was more than Lise's bass and Mark's banjo producing the noise. There was also a jingling, clanging, smacking percussion.

They drove closer. Through the windows they saw their housemates playing instruments and dancing wildly. As Wright turned off the engine, and mumbled sorry to Brandy, Paul lifted a wiggling, laughing, maraca-wielding Edgar up on his shoulders. Brandy did not respond. But she did look up, and something had relaxed in her face. She smiled in at Edgar, who had not yet seen her.

In the doorway, Wright and Brandy stopped to watch and listen. Wright hadn't digested what had happened in the car and in the field—he actually wasn't planning to—but he was happy to be back with his people.

Helen, clapping a tambourine against her hip, grinned at them from across the room. Nat stood beside her, swaying and taking pictures. Marissa shook a maraca too, while kicking blocks and puzzle pieces and what looked to Wright like cheese cubes and raisins away from Paul's shuffling feet. Lise and Mark were flushed and sweating and strumming. On the table behind them two open bottles of wine, one empty, and two red-filled glass jars.

Brandy entered the dance party with a dramatic wave. Wright watched, in sadness. He had been so close, yet not at all. And now what? Edgar began flapping his arms and leaned down from Paul's shoulders. Brandy took her son into her arms, holding him tight while shaking her hips, bending her knees, sinking, for a couple beats, closer to the dirty wooden floor.

Wright watched her. He stood so still that he felt fake. He wanted to run away, or for Brandy to leave and for him to stay inside and never leave again. When Wright forced himself to look away from Brandy, there was Nat, staring at him, like she knew.

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It had to crash, of course, the summer joy of Scratch Creek Farm. The upright bass, too. Everyone spun in abandon. Paul stepped out to take a sip of water, and watched Edgar lose his footing. He spun into the bass, then Lise's shin. Paul, who had not drunk a thing, saw her crumple in drunk surprise. Everything kept moving, but also the tennis ball at the bottom of the bass slid, skid. He wanted to be there in time, to stop the process, but he wasn't. The great bass grappled a bit more with the floor, then crashed atop Edgar's little leg.

The first thing Paul heard Brandy say—after they'd all decided Edgar's neck, head, and back were intact—before words of outrage or blame or even comfort to the boy in Spanish: I have to leave for the diner in an hour. Please tell me you won't take him to the hospital.

Paul watched Marissa handle Edgar's leg. His femur to shin was the mottled puce of a black krim tomato, finally ripened. The child was screaming. Brandy fiddled the buttons open on her blouse to let him nurse. Paul wanted to hold him, and knew he would, as soon as Brandy left the room.

She'd make an arnica and St. John's wort and castor oil salve, later that night, Brandy explained. It would do the trick, but for now, she had to go. Because at home, she said, not going, not leaving so Paul could tend to Edgar the way he saw fit, when Hernan had cut open his hand, and the clinic was out of supplies, the nurse sutured skin with

fishing line. And when she herself had possibly broken her foot, and there was no way she could get an x-ray, nor a medical boot, Hernan's homemade splint had worked just as well, and crutches were easily fashioned.

He can put pressure on it, Paul heard Brandy say, which was only partially true. Marissa grimaced.

...then he's fine. Nothing to worry about.

Brandy packed herself into a sweater, as an unexpected cool had gusted down from the Arctic. She drove away, and her little son cried and cried, scooped into Paul's arms.

Several years earlier, Scratch Creek had begun and then promptly quit a lambing operation. Too much work and guilt. Some neighbors bought the humble herd to start up a home creamery, and Paul helped in the slaughter of the little males that would not service those ends. After that, Paul had not eaten lamb or sheep cheese again. He thought on the day, and all its terror, as Edgar wailed. The minutes wore on, and pity turned to concern to rage. His counterparts moved about him, running to the store for children's pain reliever, making dinner, serving dinner, doing dishes, pickling cucumbers, but all of it was half-hearted. The look of Edgar's leg improved—I think he'll probably be okay, Marissa said sometimes—but still he cried, shaken. Or injured. He'd play for a few minutes, or eat a couple bites of food, and then remember his leg, and start all over again. When it was bedtime, and then beyond, and the boy would not settle for more than few minutes, Paul made a decision.

We have to take him in.

Let's call her first, offered Marissa. Paul nodded, and put Edgar in her lap, and stood up to stretch.

And so Brandy's indifferent manager mumbled to Paul that he would relay the message, and hung up. Paul rubbed Edgar's back, and the child dozed. Upstairs, he could hear Mark and Lise talking upstairs, their words tense, Lise's voice weepy.

He paced up and down the hallway. This is such bullshit, he said. Nat pat him on the shoulder, and she and Helen shrugged. As they were walking away to retire to their room, Paul called after them, Is this child abuse? Their no was a mumble.

Paul wasn't listening. He went outside, to think, under a cold, clear, nearly moonless sky. To rehearse rage-filled speeches for Brandy. To try to isolate what about what his life had recently become was making him crazy. To imagine Brandy getting angry, whisking the child away, back to Venezuela, only to die, say, on a bus shot up on a rural road. Edgar was not gone, but already Paul was focusing on remembering the smell of his head, as if he was the mother of an infant. Clasp the close the lullabies he had relearned, and sung, often throughout that summer.

You talk about mothering like it's your calling, he said aloud to Brandy who was not there. He knew this was not quite true, though of course she loved her son.

You talk about everything like it's your calling, but this job you can't quit. You just can't.

And he knew this wasn't true either. What if she did quit. What if she gave him her son? But he banished the thought. It was wrong. Everything was wrong and so in the dark Paul called Whiskey Biscuit again and yelled at the manager this time. Inside, Edgar

was sleeping, but the light bang of the screen door against the doorframe startled him, and he screeched.

Let's go, said Paul. The child clutched his leg.

Marissa nodded. Okay, she said.

They drove in silence while Edgar whimpered, and as they got closer Paul, who sat in the back seat holding his hand, reeled. In anger, in fear, in helplessness. All evening he'd wanted Edgar seen by a professional, but now he was considering not the details of Brandy's strange exodus but her son's visa status, his eligibility for medical care. Logistical waking nightmares.

What if he's not supposed to be here?

Marissa picked his thought up immediately, and in the terrible night this was a moment of solace, that his partner had been wondering the same questions. But she didn't know the answer. I went to nursing school so long ago, she said.

What if he has to go away? Paul whispered after another mile, when Edgar was asleep again, and Marissa slowed the car, and then Paul said everything on his mind, to Marissa's stolid silence: Tell me that's not a real question, that I'm overreacting—and—Who is Edgar to us, when we leave the farm? Who is Edgar in the real world?—and—Is there something wrong with us that we don't have the tools to take a child to the hospital?—and—Does he even have papers? Wouldn't everything be okay since Brandy is a citizen? Is she working on the books?

Fuck it. We need to turn around, Marissa said after a bit.

But his leg?

I don't think it's broken. Nothing felt off. We can get him through tonight on more medicine. But we need to talk with Brandy before we take him in.

On the drive back Paul sat up front and they saw to the east a green glow.

The Aurora, whispered Brandy. She slowed again, but kept going, and they watched the flickering luminescence. Paul took his partner's hand, and then said what had been bothering most.

I think we were wrong, about children. About a child.

Um.

What if...

Shit, Paul. We *have* an injured and foreign child in our backseat. I can't think beyond that.

Well you're thirty-seven, so.

I know. My ovaries, blah blah blah. But we'd decided, so I guess I wasn't feeling any pressure.

Whoa, okay. We can talk about this later.

We can?

Sure.

I didn't—I mean, I thought the conversation was—

A flash in the road—Fuck!—and Marissa hit the brakes, skid a bit. A hefty young buck, barely escaped. Paul took her hand but she yanked it free, and shook her head too.

I don't want a child, end of story. And I can't even believe you're saying this, when I've been dropping hints about nursing. I don't even know what's holding us together anymore.

Edgar stirred. Shhh, Paul said. And then, because he felt desperate, like an animal, Just please, let's talk about it, later. Please.

I'm not saying another word to you.

When they drove up back up to the house out charged Brandy. She opened up the back door, and in taking Edgar out woke him up, which made him cry.

What the hell do you think you were doing? Jeopardizing my employment? I've lived through a practical warzone. I've seen dead people, dead animals. Don't you think I can decide if my son is hurt or not?

Whoa, whoa, we just called to let you know.

And you had to cuss out my manager? He said some guy called—

I didn't *cuss*, said Paul, and you woke up Edgar. Go easy. The boy reached out for him, and though Brandy pulled back, Paul relished the gesture.

Marissa looked his way. You cursed out the manager? Did you call again?

Paul rolled his eyes. He wanted to revert to that word he never used, never thought, yell, You bitch! And direct it at both of them. Instead, he said, Outside. And I didn't *cuss anyone out*. I was just firm. And look, it worked, she's home.

He ushered them all inside. In the doorframe, Brandy turned to Paul, and put her hand on his shoulder.

You are not my son's father or mother and you're nothing more than *my* friend helping *me* out which is helping Edgar so don't fucking forget that.

Paul opened his mouth to respond, but Marissa shushed them, and they split off, and when Paul found himself longing and tried to kiss Marissa in bed, she rolled over, her spine rigid against his want.

Lise decided she would purify herself. On a humid day in early August she did not take her meds or slip any Baileys into her morning coffee. She slurped down a chalky smoothie of greens so thick they'd snagged on the blender's blade. She left off the lipstick and tied a thin scarf around her hair. She would let the sweat of hard labor take its course, and then she would be clean and clear, able to make right decisions. Her task: turn the compost. It had been left too long, and too anaerobic under a hard-crusting top.

With each heave of the shovel, she would become like all the hardy women who did not drunkenly drop instruments on young children, who did not agree to elaborate relocation plans with their partners to take them back in tears, hours later, and then again and again. The pile was slow, this time. All those banana peels they'd never dealt with before the advent of the child. It stunk like hell, the bits of pretzels and nubs of fish sticks and all the other scraps that should have been thrown straight to the chickens, but instead were rotting. Lise wanted to be stronger, and all that noise—that told her she needed to drink all day long and go to Nashville and first become famous in *Harvest Basket Quarterly* which meant dying on the farm for one more year and that she needed to forsake an entire night of practice to weep quietly in her bedroom over the feigned beauty of the women and men in the magazine who looked so damn happy and healthy and wholesome—well it could go fuck itself. It could run down in radioactive streams over her burning skin, with all the other toxins she had some fuzzy pseudo-scientific idea that she was expelling through the power of good honest work.

Helen looked out the window, holding her empty travel mug waiting for her coffee to steep. Nat and the others harvested. The garden was tall, and Helen could only see their arms swiping, heads peaking, slight bending motions through the vegetation. Flesh and hair and fabric. Nat barely indistinguishable from the rest. Edgar was in there too, though she couldn't see him. Under the window and next to the house, the cat who had recently appeared and made himself a resident slipped by, mouse in mouth. So much life, buzzing around her, she thought. And all Helen did in that moment was breathe, waiting to assert light force on the French press, on thin bits of metal, plastic and glass.

Chapter Ten: To Edgar

In the last pulse of summer, your leg healed, fading from purple to red to yellow green to a shadow of a bruise against your olive skin. We never took you to the hospital, not even a clinic. We were afraid of your mother taking you away. Of finding the suitcases gone, your room empty, window open with a ladder propped against the chipping shingles of our farmhouse. If your leg bones ever shatter, after a fall from a bicycle or another minor accident, you will know why. But what is inflexible in adulthood can be plastic in youth, and perhaps your body is perfect.

And during this time, the final rush of berries. A burst sweet artery. Picked. Ate. Sold. Washed and crushed and sugared and heated and put away in sealed jars. This from what we grew, nothing else. Maybe we wandered into the woods down to the water to find the thimbleberries on their broad-leafed bushes heavy and red, collapsing on our fingers with first contact, shoveled straight to mouths, before juice could drip.

Your mother, she did not pick one berry, tame or wild, not that we saw. She worked, from the pot farm to the shower, stooped over you for a quick hug, and off to Whiskey Biscuit, to smile at the diners and take their tips.

You tried them all.

He's naming them in Spanish, we told your mother, even though those days you were speaking Spanish less and less. We remembered the words you had used, and reproduced them. Brandy, who was sitting on the couch in her server's clothes with a nightcap, laughed and shook her head.

Those aren't words in any language I know.

She went back to what she had been doing before we spoke to her: counting cash. Her tongue was poised on her lips while she nodded with each bill.

We might just pull this off, she said to nobody.

Still not addressing us, she added, What was I thinking? I could have been and done and seen so much more.

We closed our books, bid our goodnights, and began the shuffle to our bedrooms. Heard one last thing: This may be the first real thing I do. We turned to look from our shadowy space at the stairway's base. Her eyes were closed, face up, like a prayer, pale in the lamps cool tint.

We thought of your nonsensical berries. To be a child, naïve that everything has already been named, not once, but over and over and over again.

As the hazy burn of summer joy faded, like it had to, there was not only the threat of autumn and good or bad news, whatever that meant, from *Harvest Basket Quarterly*, or decisions to be made, but there lurked a longing for forgiveness. We did not fault your mother for the look on her face when she counted her money. We did wonder if the little fund she had procured was futile. If her case was hopeless. We thought a lot about agency—the fact that all along maybe none of us had it, except for brief moments wasted before realized.

We're not saying this right.

So, imagine a window. For each of us, you too. Maybe it's been long closed, or not yet opened, but if and when it does open that half a second or less is crucial. What a terrible metaphor.

Or, look, we gave ourselves a narrative. We were farmers. Simple. No more, no less. A gentle and earthy forging into innocence. The way we saw the world was that Brandy, like all of us, had worked for years with her face in the dirt. Except because of unlucky—or unwisely chosen—geography, politics had found her, of necessity, and not the other way around.

When we were younger, we wouldn't have pegged ourselves for these passive existences. Now, it was unsettling.

What we couldn't ask, then: if we were landowners in Latin America, like we were landowners in North America, would we cling to our privilege? Your parents' predicament seemed so dramatic and fraught to us, way up north, but to them must have been a problem made up of unpleasant minutiae.

Ah, would we justify it in a million ways? Brandy had, easily enough: they'll slash and burn too often, they'll overrun it with livestock, they'll douse it with chemicals. Were we capable of being the bad guys, believing ourselves righteous?

No, back then, we didn't directly address this or anything like it, but strange, unrelated memories of our youths kept uprooting themselves that season, as August cooled into another fall. One night, after you were sleeping and Brandy was, of course, at work, we sat around our fire outside with hot chocolate or beer, telling stories.

And this is what we confessed:

Grade school, at a regional park on a dirty lake. There were too many families. The bathrooms had open showers on concrete slabs. The stinking dripping stalls were teeming with tiny frogs. Old enough to have lost first pets, and cried those tears. Threw them, fistfuls. Their soft bodies cracked against ceiling, floor. They tried to slink away,

but were again taken up in clammy palms. How many necks, arms, backs, legs broke in one night? What was the meaning of all that laughter slapped against wet walls?

No, no, I have one that's worse.

Junior high, yearbook class. Bright idea to affix the heads of peers to hand-drawn bodies, and bubble quotes. Should have used the popular kids, if that. But the opposite happened. The shy girl who dressed like a boy and buzzed the sides of her hair. Probably later became a man (if she made it, the thing left unsaid). Put that face on a leotard and tutu, budding breasts. The chubby boy from Fiji? Flowing robes, curling shoes. The Ojibwe kids too? Feathers? You bet. No, no, no, wicked, wicked youth. We were too smart—had seen too much, had once pledged our lives for changed—to shrug and say, Just kids!

We couldn't stop, piling these perversities upon each other, begging the fire to take them.

Listen to this one, guys.

Marched down behind a grandparent's home, to a pond that was full of fish and lily pads and little fluttering birds, with two heavy buckets of paint and a little flat-headed screw driver tucked through a belt loop. Wanted to see what it looked like, the stark separation (that would not last).

You must have been young? Seven? Eight? Don't be so hard on yourself.

Sixteen. After a breakup. Treasurer of the Environment Club.

I have a story. You don't wanna know...

Tell us.

Summer between college years. A first experiment with farming, and solstice lamb slaughtered with a (too blunt) knife because it was more natural than a gun.

No, don't tell us more.

We had to keep going.

Stop.

And there was a memory of a boardwalk, on an ocean not a lake, because there was that crab, wasn't there, and excited parents, ready to snap the photo. Squash, the quick curl of legs, the falling faces, the recognition of, Oh, my perfect child I created, this child will destroy.

You are waiting for us to tell you that you did something horrible that summer, right? Squeezed a chick to death or hung a kitten on the string of a party balloon or bit into your mother's breast so deep that it became an unstoppable infection and traveled to her brain. Wrong. You let the world happen around you, navigating it with open eyes and busy fingers. What evils you were committing we could not count or see. They will haunt you when the time is right. Your cells regenerated until your skin showed no sign of injury and all around you conquered small plants and animals to your liking.

Your mother carried you in her womb, and then birthed you. She breastfed you, and kept you safe from venomous or sharp-toothed creatures and soggy ravines and poisons and tractors and skill-saws and temple-crushing edges of coffee tables and jagged edges of rocks protruding from soil. She did all this while laying you down to sleep each

night in a space where you would not accidentally asphyxiate, and then holding your hand as you learned to walk, while spoon feeding you soft peas and singing you the songs that would imprint themselves on your brain as the foundations of language. She packed up your few possessions, made you kiss your father goodbye, and put you on airplane, and then dropped you in our arms. She came too, but in the big picture, her time with us and with you on Scratch Creek Farm is a wink.

A phone call set the rest of her life in motion. It was six in the morning, and we were waking, slow. Coffee pot on, but not yet ready. You at the front door, ready to go play in the burgeoning light. A phone rang—not your mother’s, she didn’t have one—and the voice on the other end demanded she speak. The words were Spanish but we knew immediately what they meant. A knock on your mother’s door. She said to come in, and was pulling a thermal shirt over a dirty camisole which reeked of weed. We watched her take the phone. Her face went sick and she went outside, and all through breakfast words made their way into our kitchen: raid, standoff, I’m coming. You were up in your tree by then. You’d mastered climbing up and down. When the conversation was over, your mother held the phone for a moment, looking at it. Then she threw it into the ground. You looked up at her, and she came to fetch you.

Back in the house, she, in between kissing your head, said, Everything is going to be fine.

We pressed her for details. She lied when she said there was nothing to share, we knew. She poured her coffee and made a piece of toast with peanut butter like she was a robot. She went back upstairs, hugged you goodbye, and drove to the pot farm, came home, went to the diner, after that straight to bed, and then went back to the pot farm the

next morning, we believed. That afternoon, your mother did not come home from work, and we figured she'd gone directly to Whiskey Biscuit.

But when the pot farmers showed up at our house late that night looking for Brandy, saying there was a problem, that maybe she knew something about missing plants or money or what exactly we don't remember, and we called Whiskey Biscuit, and the manager yelled back at us saying she'd never showed, and we went upstairs to her bedroom, and then we started digging through her things like we were mad. We threw back the bedcovers and shook books and shoes and were looking for perhaps whatever the weed farm had accused her of taking, and then we were looking for her favorite shirt, her money, a necklace your father welded that she only wore when happy or nostalgic, her passport, or her, hiding under the bed. We found none of these things. You joined in our game for a bit, jumping off the bed and squealing as we all threw shit around. But then you tired, and sniffled, saying again and again, I want Mama.

We shook our heads to the pot farmers, who warned us they'd be back. We knew we'd find the car in the airport parking lot, ticketed. We were right. We called the Venezuela number on our phone. The first few days, it rang and rang. Then, it was dead. We called your mother's parents, who knew nothing. We scoured the Internet, blindly.

We waited. When you asked where your mother had gone, we invented stories. They were not good stories. The best one involved a macaw that had gotten lost, on top of a skyscraper. It was afraid to fly down. This particular bird would only eat your mother's arepas, and only if she hand-fed them to him, and so your mother had to coax the macaw down, story by story, one cheesy corn cake after another, and we had to think

happy thoughts for both of them, because the work was hard and strange, and only your mother was good enough for the job.

Chapter Eleven: *Harvest Basket Quarterly* vs. Scratch Creek Farm

The editor, his pretty wife, and the hired photographer were cold. The editor tugged down his cap and she drew close her oatmeal cardigan. The farmers in their summer wool and snagged poly-blends told the couple that the day was unseasonably warm. Overhead the leaves were orange.

The editor asked his contact, the farmer named Nathalie, about the discrepancy between the emails and reality.

Nathalie with the farmers following hesitant marched the editor and his wife out to the chokecherry trees, which were not actually on the same property.

A young child spoke with a Spanish accent. None of the adults seemed to speak Spanish. He clung to the tall bald farmer.

The editor asked the farmers if there was still a wild-crafting CSA in the works, or about the seasonal candlelit dinners of foraged foods, the shelves of brown and green and blue and red medicines crafted from Native American folk recipes, and they looked back at him bewildered, and then to Nathalie. She then stuttered about the berries, many of which were dead in the grass below, and asked another farmer, who looked tired and whose hands were constantly crossed in front of her chest, what it was exactly that the berries could do. This one, she said some things about antioxidants, and it all sounded like a eulogy.

Walking back to the Scratch Creek gardens, the farmer Nathalie said quietly to the editor, Please believe me when I tell you it will be better next time. We've experienced a... shift.

In the greenhouse, the young plants were leggy. The smell of mold abounded. A crumble of soft blue sometimes in the squares of soaking soil. The editor touched one seedling, and the black dirt collapsed around the too-pale, too wet root system.

The musician farmer couple followed him into the structure, halfway playing. The fiddler explained upright bass was her main instrument, but it was inside the house, and that they were welcome in the house, though they'd like to tidy it up more before any photographs were taken. The man on the banjo leaned in close to the editor. His breath smelled of bourbon.

Just between you and I, the banjoist, said, Our farm manager actually took a job in upstate New York a few weeks back.

The fiddler-bassist said, Don't tell him! She shook her head. The editor liked the tousled glow of her hair when she did this. He would have to focus on her, if this project would work. She was the prettiest, and he could not tell if was good or bad that she looked so sad. But he needed her bright lips, the splashes of color in her clothing, her delicate fingers against the wooden instrument.

Outside, the editor's wife stood over what looked like a defunct sandbox, the young child below explaining his garden of dandelions gone to seed. Then, through the greenhouse's warped doorframe, the editor saw the boy stop, look up at his wife, and ask, Do you know my mama?

The editor shuddered and also directed his photographer to take a photo of his wife stooping to the little child. The editor's photographer took many photographs. They would not beautiful in the way they'd expected, the editor knew—the farm was but a poor shadow of what similar-sized farms were doing outside of New York and Portland a

decade earlier, and also seemed particularly possessed—but the editor believed he could work with anything. What would he do with the child? Yes, there was no doubt a tough conversation coming with Nathalie, but he was sure they could get things straightened out.

After a time, the editor and his wife took a walk around the farm's perimeter while the photographer lagged and took more shots. It would be dinner time soon, and the farmers requested a few moments to get their house in order before the cooking begun. The editor's wife clutched her husband's elbow and whispered, Something has happened to these people.

Sshhh, said the editor. That's not our job.

The boy's mother, she persisted.

Everyone does families different.

I think she's dead. And he doesn't know it yet. I just know it.

Sshhh, crooned the editor. Inside, he was horrified, but one of them had to hold it together.

Chapter Twelve: Rough Draft

Fall Visit

The farmers of Scratch Creek Farm not only tend the moist soil of the far north, they seem to grow from it, like one strong tree with many branches, ~~tall and bold like the birches around it.~~

They are naturals in the cold and wooded landscape, with their summer wool, their jewel-toned socks pulled up over worn denim, their mud-crust-ed boots.

Scratch Creek Farm is ~~confirmation that beyond our phones and computer screens, is a world both quiet and teeming with life. There is existence outside of our bustling cities.~~ An existence pushed along by seasons and natural diurnal rhythms.

~~The Scratch Creek Farm community is not a technical family, but are tethered by something stronger than blood, and we at Harvest Basket Quarterly would have to guess it has to do with unified hands in the dirt, the years of books read and stories created, songs written and played, how many moments on the swing, on the hammock.~~

Each morning, the farmers of Scratch Creek farm sip coffee, and eat eggs with bright golden rod yolks on sourdough bread, while the little one spoons oatmeal into his eager mouth. The child likes to stand on a stool to wash his bowl. As he does, he is bathed in the morning light.

~~The farmers of Scratch Creek Farm have an enviable life.~~

This small but expansive world is both natural and the creative result of human curation: lives spun together in intimacy with the earth, a careful listening to its rhythms. These are people who have learned to live ~~with ease~~ in a climate others might call brutal.

When we asked how they handle winter after winter, they shrugged. It nourishes us, they said. How can one expect the green and flowers, without the time of waiting?

We absorbed all they had to offer, picking the last tomatoes from their vines, plucking tender young beets from the dark soil, ~~knocking on possibly ripe squash and pumpkins in a dark brown field, searching for pale half moons on orange skins to ascertain for ripeness.~~ *(Note: we did this with melons, at another farm. Wrong here.)* Getting lost in the vision of goldenrod and aster. ~~September's waning light.~~

I stole a tender look with my wife. I wanted to heap up these moments in my arms, ~~even as September's gentle light waned.~~ But I looked at the farmers, and did not see such urgency on their faces. They have given themselves to this climate, and it does not scare them.

~~Amongst the bustling farmers, Marissa stands back. The boy, Edgar, treats her partner Paul, like a father, and she takes it in....~~

~~Nathalie, their natural leader,~~

~~Lovely Lise with her flowing golden waves, who has the essence of a woman from a different time, a time that is sweeter and simpler than our modern world, picks (strums? Which one?) at her fiddle as if it is a necessary component of growing beautiful plants in the natural landscape.~~

As the September air cooled and the evening light ~~faded~~ waned, my wife and I sat with the farmers of Scratch Creek around a humble fire. It was dinner time, and though in the morning they had told of us plans to cook an elaborate dinner in their airy and impressive yellow kitchen, these are intuitive humans who are so tethered to the natural but delicate needs of the land and to the young ~~orphan~~ boy child with gold-tipped dark

curls they are ~~raising~~ rearing as a community. (*Add in more beautiful details. Stuff about the contrast of birch trees against dusk... whatever.*)

Plans went differently. But this was no problem, as the landscape boasts hardy and natural ingredients, and where there are tall trees, growing gardens, good people and food, there is not only a meal but a moment. And so we ate outside, drinking strong black coffee and savoring crusty homemade sourdough, thick slices of salty purple-black heirloom tomatoes from their very garden, and hunks of cheese, which had been traded, along with maple syrup, for vegetables and eggs with a farm down the street. For dessert we bit into early autumn's first crisp apples. The night wore on, with music that seemed to be a natural extension of the earth around us...

The little one, he licked butter from bread, with his tiny teeth tore the flesh of fruit from peel. While bundled in a hand-knit sweater and red stocking cap, he danced barefoot in the chilly grass before the fire, entranced by the flames. Every few minutes, he retreated from the glow, into the various arms of the farmers of Scratch Creek. Time and again, they received him with love, and eventually, as the moon rose in the sky, he fell asleep in one farmer's lap. My wife and I looked at each other, and smiled. We considered this little one's upbringing, how the earth holds him in an embrace, or that he can't yet understand why that is special.

Winter Visit

Spring Visit

Summer Visit

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