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## Ghost, Moving

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GHOST, MOVING

By

Andrea E. Wuorenmaa

THESIS

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Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

GHOST, MOVING

This thesis by Andrea Wuorenmaa 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  
GHOST, MOVING

By

Andrea E. Wuorenmaa

This collection of creative nonfiction essays weaves a journey through local history, genealogy, physical landscape, and personal memoir. The essays therein investigate the past through the lens of the present, and the present as informed by the past. Written from a first person perspective, many of the essays directly address individuals or time periods long gone, while all of them are constructed with the memory, research, and imagination of the author.

Though this collection is rooted in history, it also relies on the metaphysical to create a vision of the past. Intangible themes—life, death, a farewell to things and people as they once materially existed (aligned with their recreation in the present through memory)—are explored by way of speculation, supposition, and hope. The author has sought to find, and hold tightly to, the delicate, unsevered thread that connects us back through the ages.

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I have the utmost gratitude to Matthew Gavin Frank, my thesis chair. Over the past four years he has become my greatest mentor as a creative nonfiction writer, always urging me to tell my truth, whatever it may be. The care and encouragement he devoted to each of these essays allowed me to shape them into what I wanted them to become. More than anyone else, he has believed in my writing—in the power of the images and words. I owe it to him that this vision became a reality.

To Bob Archibald, my mentor in the NMU History Department: even the most eloquent writer could not articulate how grateful I am for your support of my creativity and vision over the past year and a half. Many of the ideas we have spoken about have yet to become a reality as of the completion of this thesis, but the inspiration our conversations has given me will continue to influence my future works. Thank you for your dedication to this project and to my craft in general. Your insight has changed the way I perceive and write about the past.

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I appreciate Charles Bulinski for his influence on the composition of this collection. Thank you for being my sounding board, my confidant, my advisor of all things mining. This thesis would not exist if not for you.

Mom: thank you for always believing in me, for being such a powerful role model, and for encouraging me to honor Dad's memory.

To my family and close friends: I am so grateful for your constant support of me throughout this thesis project. I needed a strong foundation, and you gave it to me.

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## INTRODUCTION

The past three years of my life—the time that I have devoted to this project—have been illuminating.

I decided to embark on an MFA program because I wanted to write a book. I desired to compose two hundred pages of my own creative nonfiction to be bound together and read—and I wanted this so that I could form a connection with an audience. As a person, and as a writer, I have always been deeply inside of myself. Writing has become my way of looking inward to reach outward. It started because I lost my father to a heart attack at a young age and I wanted to help the world get to know him the way that I did. It continued because I have no other way to animate and replay the incredible things that have happened to me in the past thirty years. I am as nostalgic as I am insular. I do not want to let the past go; I hold it as an ever-spiraling reel of clips and scenes, voices and images, inside of me. It turns out, however, that if I hold it within too long, it swells to the point of bursting. I recall what my advisor, Matt Frank, once said to me about my writing: “You need to stop being selfish. You need to share.”

To share is a difficult task at times. As a creative nonfiction writer, I am self-conscious; who wouldn't be when you bare your soul with every word you type? I am trying to get you to see what I have seen. I am trying to get

you to feel what I have felt. I want you to really know me. It's frightening and it's overwhelming, but when it pays off, it's the most magnificent accomplishment I can imagine.

The above is only a shred of the mixed emotion involved with being a creative nonfiction writer. With a constant dredging up of the past, of memory, comes hurt—a great deal of it. I was a writer for years before I began this project, and yet I had never experienced so many moments of having to get up and walk away from my laptop out of restlessness from what I was putting my brain through; out of not being able to bear what I was recalling and what it meant about myself and about life. I wrote many of these essays sitting in a newly-arranged office in the house that I grew up in. I traversed a lot of these pages with an image of my dad floating around in the back of my mind: my dad upstairs, my dad in the basement, my dad on the front sidewalk. My dad getting into his truck for midnight shift. My dad in his grave. I couldn't get away from him. But no matter how much pain it caused, I immersed myself in his world as much as in my own. I allowed myself to fall into the past and live there for a while. It was the only way I could get these essays written.

It healed as many wounds as it split open. I felt better every time an essay was done. I came to know myself and my purpose a little bit more. In all of that was the reward.

Even with five years of graduate-level writing classes behind me, I can't say I remember many craft essays about creative nonfiction, nor do I remember much about theory. I know that what I have read, I have absorbed, and it comes across in what I do now. But in reflecting on whose words have influenced how I sharpened my craft, it is tough to come up with many examples. One writer I am certain of, however, is Colum McCann. I first read his novel *TransAtlantic* in 2014, and I subsequently devoured any of his writing that I came across. Though he is a fiction writer, his work has been influential in that it so directly correlates with what I want my own writing about the past to be. Further, McCann started a blog this past year, *Letter to a Young Writer*, which has given me more insight into why and how I write than any other piece of craft-writing I can recall. In his first letter, McCann stated:

Write beyond despair. Make justice from reality. Make vision from the dark. The considered grief is so much better than the unconsidered. Be suspicious of that which gives you too much consolation. Hope and belief and faith will fail you often. So what? Share your rage. Resist. Denounce. Have stamina. Have courage. Have perseverance.

And, further: "Satisfy the appetite for seriousness and joy. Dilate your nostrils. Fill your lungs with language. A lot can be taken from you — even your life — but not your stories about your life."

Because of McCann’s vision of writing—to “make vision from the dark,” to consider grief—I have been able to write through the moments that are the most difficult and come out the other side not only unscathed, but with a sense of power and resolution.

In its early stages, this essay collection was not meant to be my memoir. I had already written one essay collection about my childhood with my dad, and I told myself that it was done and I would not do it again. What I wanted to write, in this collection, was a memoir of my hometown of Ishpeming, Michigan. I had seen it fall into some decay, and I wanted to bring back to life its early days, from the first log cabin built by mining prospectors to the days when passenger trains chugged into the city and wealthy magnates dined and slept at the Mather Inn. Living back in my hometown after some time away, I spent many days walking on the streets and up into the bluffs, envisioning what it had once been like. I could climb to the top of the hill a couple of blocks from my house and, within the enclosure of maples and pines, my shoes on the iron-red dirt, I could close my eyes and imagine I was in another century. Ishpeming was quiet enough; it was easy to do. I made it my goal to tease that image out of my head, write it, and make it a reality for others. But it turned out to be a daunting task. Because it turned out that when I sat down at my desk, all I wanted to do was write about my dad again.

I have stuck with the idea that it was not just my family that made me, but the town. Many of my classmates moved away when they turned eighteen, and more left after graduating college. But other than a brief stint in Ireland, I stayed here. As a place-writer at heart, it has been important for me to value the city that raised me. However, it is difficult to write about it without having a focal point, and, continually, that focal point has been my family; specifically, my dad's side of the family. So when I began to research Ishpeming's past—while considering it my own past, whether or not my ancestors were here yet—I also came up with a lot of questions about my great-grandparents. In trying to answer those questions, I started to write about them. I imagined their lives and their past as much as I could. I put them into places in my town—a home, a mine—and I wrote what I could, based on speculation and vision and DNA. Thus, in this project, everything that I have learned about Ishpeming is best reflected in how I wrote about my family. There are fewer historic essays than I had hoped for, but what I learned helped to lay the foundation for what I truly wanted to write about.

“Ishpeming: A Map” was the first essay I wrote that inspired me to research the town more fully—I focused on various places, and I wanted to know more about them. The essay “A Search” does its own work in sharing the type of historic research I completed over the past two years. In that essay, I used various research locations as pinpoints to highlight how the journey felt. The essay was almost a requirement for me, in order to process

everything that I had been doing and reading and looking at to complete this thesis. The essay “An Excavation,” on the other hand, is the direct result of the research, rather than the process. Writing it allowed me to travel through Ishpeming based on a familiar snowmobile ride with my dad, using that path to open up various historic locations and moments. One thing that I had struggled with in writing about history was where to start. This essay gave me one point of entry, and I am sure that in the future I will find more.

Finally, “From the Rafters” is, for me personally, the most pleasing culmination of research in this collection. I had long been wanting to write about the family that once lived in my home, but I did not feel educated enough to do so. By researching, reading, and merely closing my eyes and imagining, I was able to come up with a past that seemed accurate and meaningful—again, paired up with my own experiences in the same place.

As I reflect on every essay I wrote for this collection, many of them include local history without me having put much thought into the act of the inclusion. “Suicide Hill,” for example, is a reflection on a meaningful moment with my dad and brother, but it also tells a story about the town and its people. “Open Pit” looks back on the early days of mining in Ishpeming, though on the surface it’s about walking my dog in an isolated place. “Rise, Fall” began as a piece of travel writing from my trip to Cornwall (which was, of course, a research journey as well), but I wound up including a bit about

Ishpeming, as well. Thus, the history that I immersed myself in has materialized in this collection in unexpected ways.

If I had to pin down a theme for the essays in this collection as a whole, it would be discovering both my family and myself. The most recent pieces included here—“The Bee” and “A Eulogy, Collective”—are what I am thinking of when I say that the past three years of my life have been illuminating. Each essay is heavy and honest; each one digs deeply into topics that I used to avoid.

“The Bee” is a very *me* essay. It’s a trip through relationships—exes, my mother, my father, women and men I’ve never met—in an attempt to get to know myself as a writer and as a person. I had to edit the essay down quite a bit. I had to decide how much to share. In her craft essay “Writing the Truth in Memoir: Don’t Skimp on Objectivity,” appearing in *Brevity*, writer Amye Archer states: “Writing about the people we have loved and who have hurt us can be a tricky business . . . The best way to achieve that coveted neutral perspective is to walk further away from the fire itself, and the most effective way to do so is through revision.” So I revised and revised. But at the end of the day, “The Bee” is incredibly honest—likely the most honest thing I have ever written for the public. And for that, I am proud of it.

“A Eulogy” is also honest, about my family as much as myself. I don’t know why I have this obsession with the Wuorenmaas, but I do. I connect with them—even the ones I never knew. I started by writing “Wuorenmaa



Women,” which was the result of having gone to a ladies’ luncheon with that side of the family one summer. “Eulogy,” however, is my own story of the people in my family. Some might say it is inaccurate, but I say that it is my truth. I have kept true to what I remember, and it is because I do not want my memories or visions of these people to disappear. I hope to make something about them permanent, even if it’s only one thing I saw them do or imagined they might have done.

As far as form goes, this thesis collection contains more flash essays than I had ever envisioned myself writing. Due to taking a flash nonfiction workshop with Jennifer Howard, I was able to learn to contain my thoughts into just a page or two, rather than a long, blown-up essay. Pieces like “Holiday Season,” “Winter Shift,” “Pellets,” and “I Can’t Sleep at Night,” came about due to the workshop, but fit into the theme of the collection surprisingly well. These short essays began as stepping stones to larger projects, and with revision they became powerful, standalone pieces themselves. Though they focus on different places and times, they are true to my memories of Ishpeming and family and history and winter time. I also found that I liked the balance of having lengthy, in-depth essays alongside short pieces that captured a single moment. The forms have become equally meaningful to me.

“Honey,” on the other hand, is a form of writing that I had never attempted before. I consider it a “found essay”; it is composed of letters my

grandfather Martin and my dad wrote home, during World War II and the Vietnam War, respectively. Martin wrote to his wife, my grandmother, Elaine, and my dad wrote to his parents—Martin and Elaine. I have long wanted to read all of these letters, and it will take me a long time to do so. For “Honey,” I was able to find snippets here and there that created a powerful story about war, life, death, love, and what it means to miss someone. Of all of the essays in this collection, “Honey” is the one I am most proud of. It was born of not just myself, but my dad, and his dad, and my grandmother, and all of the people they wrote about and whose lives they touched during that time frame and beyond. It is a generational essay, a collaboration; and I feel so lucky to be able to have that in my portfolio. I have an emotional response every time I revisit that essay.

It has taken a long time for me to be comfortable with my writing, and as a writer, I am still very much a work in progress. This project contains a lot of experimentation: trying out different types of writing to see what fits, while constantly returning to the same themes and ideas. I have found that throughout writing and workshopping for my MFA, I have become more honest. I have worried less about what people will think when they read my work. This may seem contradictory, as a large part of earning an MFA is receiving critiques from others. But I have found that if I can sit down and tell it like it really is, there will be fewer constraints—fewer of the blockades that once prevented me from writing at all. It is better for me to write big and

sprawling and true, and then scale it back if I find a reason to later. It has been more productive for me to treat my essays like journals than like perfect pieces of craft to be published in a literary journal. The essays in this collection are honest about myself and about the past, and to me that is an accomplishment.

Colum McCann has another entry in his *Letter to a Young Writer* blog: “To MFA or Not to MFA?” Here, he states:

The truth is that nobody can teach you how to write. An MFA program might allow you to write, but it will not teach you. But allowing is the best form of teaching anyway. There is no school but your own school. There is no one particular way. As a writer you will always find your place.

For a while, I will admit that I considered the last three years of my life with some disdain, because what I am presenting to you here is not a book. It is not the book that I hoped for when I started this journey; it is not prepared to be bound and published and given to the world. But this collection is *me*, and in reality, that is more than I could have hoped for. What you are about to read has been my method of finding my place. It is not the ending point of what I will accomplish as a writer, but it is the

culmination of three years of devoting myself to this craft, and I have learned a great deal.

The essays in this collection, then, were not planned, but they emerged. They were not carefully plotted out, as one might expect a thesis to be. They were not organized via an archive of notes on years and facts and people; rather, they materialized, based on a mind challenging itself to focus and instead straying to unexpected places. They are a catalogue of what I lived, breathed, and felt over the past few years, when I allowed my mind to wander. With this journey, I arrived back at my roots, having traveling along the paths of my memory. I hope you enjoy the product, and that it brings you to your own unexpected destination.

## Rise, Fall

I took a bus from Penzance to St. Just in Cornwall, the first leg of a journey to research the now dormant mines that had bred generations of expert miners, some of which emigrated to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where I grew up. This part of Cornwall is a long stretch of land hedged by slate and gorse, with the brick chimney stacks of abandoned engine houses planted firm along the horizon. No trees. An empty coast, the dry land as open as the sea. Grassy fields along the way were feathered with the black and white bodies of cows as the bus swept by, and berries clung to bushes, the makings of cream tea and jam.

At the Levant Tin Mine, my destination after a hike down a wildflower and gravel etched road, I learned that the absent trees were felled in the nineteenth century for mining fuel and as timber for rods in Cornish steam pumps. Once the elms and alders were gone, pines were imported on Scandinavian ships, the pillars of forests turned sideways and rushed to the shores of Hayle and Portreath. Anthracite coal cut luminous from seams deep in Wales was shipped south to Cornwall's mines; as the ships came into port, sailors heard the angel-call of miners' picks chopping through bedrock beneath the ocean's floor. In hard-walled shafts under saltwater—a circuit of veins with silver-bodied fish swimming above—the miners held ax handles carved from lumber that had once been a living thing on land.

In the early twentieth century, Levant had a steam-powered man engine, which transported miners down into an underground labyrinth of tunnels with tallow candles illuminating blackened walls. In 1919, an iron link on the engine snapped and thirty-one men fell to their death at the bottom of the mine, beneath the twisted metal and splintered wood that had been forged to lift them to daylight.

The passage through which the man-engine ran is now covered by an iron grate, where I stood to peer at the odd reflection of lights above cast down the walls of the tunnel, each like the blaze of a wax candle flickering at the end of its wick. When I was young, I was taught about the 1926 Barnes-Hecker Mine collapse in my hometown of Ishpeming, Michigan, the fifty-one bodies sluiced and entombed by a cave-in of quicksand and water. The 111 fatherless children, the wives weeping shaft-side for days until rescue efforts faded away. I saw the list of names, many of them familiar even seventy years later: Aho, Chapman, Ranta, Tippett. The great-grandfathers of kids I grew up with. It was then that I knew that my dad—an iron miner—was not invincible. That he, too, would one day fall.

After the Levant Mine disaster, the surviving workers used ladders again—hours of pressing boot to rung at the beginning and end of a shift. The evening saw the miners chopping whatever timber was left in the area and putting matches to peat and wood gathered in the fireplaces of their cottages. Scant bundles of flames thrust clouds of smoke through chimneys.

The air the miners breathed, the light they saw and the warmth they felt above ground were why they took the risk of sinking under—of touching their feet to the exposed depths for the very last time.

## The Wuorenmaa Women

I've seen them at funerals—loud, chatting, their hands leathered by the winter yet paper thin, easing desserts onto plates in church basements. They are in their eighties, their nineties, their one hundreds. They pull me close to their sweaters and tell me about my dad.

“Oh, Davey, he was always there when you needed him,” they say.

When I was young and he was still alive, Dad took me to his Aunt Esther's house for blueberry pie. We picked the berries first, on the thick and brushy forest floor near the Fence River, and Dad delivered them to Esther in coffee cans. Hours later, we sat at her table while she served us the pie, smears of blue and dusts of flour mashed across her apron. With violet veins trailing her arms, she lived for fifteen years after Dad died.

Now I go to luncheons with the Wuorenmaa women in the summer, where they show me pictures, mostly of people I never knew. They are in wheelchairs and walkers, but they move faster than me. Their lungs are strong, pulling in the August air with a tinge of winter. They wear sweaters, blazers, a spread of silver jewelry. I watch them wash down French fries and steaks with coffee.

“We have so many pictures to send you,” they say. “Of your father, when he was young.”



But these are pictures that I never receive.

People tell me I have good blood with this name. But I can see it being swept away: the aging. The years going by. The women are in senior living. They are in nursing homes. They are in the high rise that overlooks a quiet downtown. I know where to find them if I need them, and sometimes, if I see them in Buck's Restaurant or Jasper Ridge or at the Christmas tree lighting, they smile sadly because I am the relic of a tragedy. I am a reminder that even good people must go, someday.

The last thing Esther ever said to me was: "Have a nice life." I know what she meant.

## Open Pit

With my dog, I walk on a path through the woods, past centuries of mine pits. I can't see their depth; they are filled with dark water, dim with chunks of hematite and magnetite. They collapse into themselves, their jagged jaws of ore crumbling. Shadows haunt their insides: machinery. Drillbits. Tree trunks felled by severe storms. Dead fish, afloat.

Ragged cement blocks surround the pits, buried beneath sponges of moss. These were once foundations: the pump house, the dry, the blasted-in shotcrete of a shaft sunk through layers and layers of hardrock, the furnace with its slow orange drip of metal once a cool and silent part of the earth's crust. Places where men clanged hammers and wiped away the iron dust caked thick on their brows, carving holes into cliffs to leave the etch of drill scars on hillsides one hundred years later. I see the men on ladders trailing up the side of the rock, or down below, loading ore chunks into carts.

My dog rolls his tongue over some moss. He taps the tips of his claws at the high edge of a pit, breeze shuffling over his ears. It's quiet now.

We come to the Malton Road, a new access point between the highway and town. This road is often empty: pines on one side and crickets on the other. It reminds me of driving across a blank prairie towards the

American West. The dog jumps into the grass, winds his belly through its weave.

As I navigate the road-side gravel, a semi-truck makes its way around a bend up ahead, slows down, and stops. The driver opens his door. He has a mess of white beard, a handicap decal dangling from his rearview mirror.

“Is this the Tilden Mine road?” He asks.

“No, not at all,” I say. “Can I see your map?”

The map is a single printed page with yellow and blue roads tangled across it. I can’t make sense of it. It looks nothing like my town. I turn it around, try to figure out where we are. I am stunned. I look for my street. It takes too long to find it.

“The road we’re on isn’t on this map yet,” I tell him.

“Lord,” he says.

“Do you have a GPS?”

“It doesn’t work up here.”

I tell him to go back the way he came from, take a left, go to the four-way stop, and take a right by the empty commercial property with insulation unsheathed down its sides. To keep going, and he’ll see the mine in a trail of snaking hardware above him. I am aware of my dog sniffing around the steaming rubber of the truck’s tires, testing his tongue against their worn

tread. I tug the leash. Standing here, we could get hit by a car, if another ever passed by.

“Well, thank you, little lady,” the driver says. The dog and I watch the truck slunk off, make a wide U-turn, transform from a faint speck into the sound of Jake brakes and the smell of burning diesel in the distance.

I’m not sure I directed him the right way.

When I was little, my dad took me to National Mine, where he grew up, a town settled within the shadow of the open-pit iron mine he worked at. The road to National Mine is a corkscrew; I never knew which direction we were going. Dad sped his Ford through a skitter of sunlight bleeding through Jack pines. The town materialized as a lull of quiet houses.

The Tilden Mine was right there: raised conveyors and troughs like aqueducts parallel to the road. Industrial production trucks, 580 tons, a thunder in the distance. Man-made mountains of red pellets and mine tailings, grass now growing as a shield over their organs.

“Look up,” Dad said. “This is the highest part of town.”

I put my feet on the top of his lunchbox where it sat on the floor of his truck, a layer of soot and refuse spread over its surface. And I wondered, then, as I do now: how deep do these men go? What is it they bring up with them? The veins of iron discovered in 1844, spilled across my dad’s palms and the lid of his Stanley.

On this path, my shoes now tread through mining grounds ripped up from the soil before Dad pulled on his first steel-toes and stepped out onto the lip of the pit, peering down into the strata.

## From the Rafters

Peter built this house in 1888. He held nails with his teeth, guiding his palms over pine boards. He thumbed knots in the wood as he pulled flooring flush to the base of the walls. Autumn sun warmed his face through slats as he filled in the house's frame, the rooms darkening by the day, the roof now shielding the attic floor, a ceiling now spread over the upstairs bedrooms. By gas light he glued wallpaper, delicate patterns his wife, Anna, would adore, poppy fields and damask, irises and wreaths.

Between shifts at the mine, he moved in furniture from Sears Roebuck & Co. A Sunshine stove, a sewing machine. He paid for a carefully planed dining table from Asgaard's, and he and Anna maneuvered it through the front door. Hairs stuck to her face; Peter reached around the edge of the table to brush them away. Soon, there would be the sound of her pouring coffee beans into a grinder in the morning, heat rising up through the stove to boil kettle water. It was this he thought of as he fixed the knob and lock onto the door and practiced turning the key for the first time.

\*

I follow Dad up the slanted ladder that leads to our attic. The white paint on its steps has always been chipped, and every time we climb, a few shavings drift to the floor. Dad pushes up the attic door and latches its chain to some plaster shaped around the roof's trusses.

The floorboards in the attic, warped from winter cold and summer heat, are soft like carpet under my feet. It's daylight, but the attic has just three tiny windows, so Dad carries a flashlight and sways its beam around the rooms. Up here, I can smell the cold as much as I can feel it. The rafters are exposed, stretching overhead like bridges. I get the sensation I'm not in my house anymore. Not in anybody's house. Sometimes, I forget that these rooms are always up above me.

We are collecting Christmas decorations. The flashlight beam lands on a plastic Santa whose colors have been fused outside the lines, whose white beard bleeds into his red suit, and whose red suit bleeds into his black boots. Dad picks up the Santa and moves him to the pathway cut through boxes. Next, two large plastic candles, their molded flames the size of Santa's head. Behind them sits an open box of Christmas lights, bulbs and strings spilling over its sides.

"This is what we really need," Dad says. He hoists the box into his arms and looks at me. Freeing a hand, he picks up a stuffed reindeer—perched alone atop a bag of garland—and gives it to me. "You want to take him down?"

I'm the first to go back down the ladder. I make sure each foot is firm against the wood before I take another step. The ladder leads down into our upstairs bathroom, which has a claw-foot tub and a yellowed porcelain sink. Someone's painted ivy vines on the walls, a fragile looking pattern, and sunlight spills down onto those hues of green just as it lights the dust caked into the corners of the bathroom floor. I put the reindeer I'm holding onto the side of the tub and watch Dad descend. Boots, jeans, leather belt, flannel shirt. I realize how much more space he fills than I do in the rectangle of the attic door frame and on the ladder's steps.

\*

In 1900, ten people lived in this house. Peter, Anna, four children, Anna's father, three boarders. Anna cooked breakfast for all: eggs, toast, raspberry jam and oatmeal, tea and coffee. Peter and the boarders came home from night shift, iron dust rimming their eyes, just as Anna's father awoke on his bed in the basement, and they all sat at the table for the morning meal. The kids came down next, from the upstairs room they all shared, and the ground floor of the house shook with the movement of all the feet and the dynamite blasts at the New York Mine a street away. The breath of so many lungs warmed the walls, and Edith, the middle child, crouched before the grates of



the range with bread on a toasting fork, toast emerging one slice at a time. She never burned it.

Empire Street was made of dirt, and when autumn shifted to winter the street turned to a thick brown sludge and froze over. The house had no front hallway as it would in the fifties, no front sunroom where cold-looking light sliced down onto the hardwood floor. A longer path led to the street from a house that hung back in the shadows of a pine and a maple tree. The whole of the front yard was a hard pack of dirt, but in the backyard Anna had planted a garden with carrots and potatoes and a tangled row of raspberry bushes. There was the wild apple tree, fledgling but growing fast, and a stand of lilac bushes that for one month clouded the lawn with a thick perfume. Wildflowers and weeds popped up all around; Edith picked Indian paintbrushes to drag along the house's wooden siding or along its concrete foundation. The loudest sound, every day—aside from the blasting—was the slam of the door as the miners went in and out, morning or afternoon or night, kicking up dust with their boots as they disappeared down the street.

\*

At night, my bedroom is the most quiet in the house and yet the most alive, the dark shapes of my vanity and dresser sentient as they glow in the silver

bar of moonlight through the curtains. I listen for sounds from the kitchen— Mom opening the freezer to crack ice from a tray, Dad setting a beer down on the table—but those sounds never seem to rise. I get up out of bed a lot, circle the room in my white nightgown with its violet flowers, and I touch things in the dark to see if they feel different, like the iron knob on my closet door or the top of my grandmother’s cedar chest. I brush my hand over the jewelry on a hanger next to the vanity mirror, silver chains and plastic beads. Like champagne glasses they clink, shimmer. In the vanity mirror I look like a ghost, and I’m so happy with that feeling that I stare for a very long time at my ivory shape, sallow cheeks and the sudden brightness of my eyes as they move and catch the light.

There have been times when, as I lie down in bed, I see the closet light switch on, or I hear a sound in the attic above me. I stay so still in those moments because I want to know who’s there, but they never do anything else, never make another sound or flip another switch. I imagine that someone died in this bedroom once, an old man with gray hair in a bed shaped just like mine. In my imagination he is wearing sweatpants and a white tank top and his skin is cold, his eyes are closed. His bed is lined up next to the window like mine is. When I think about him, I sit up in bed and look out the window to the street below, the same scene I’ve known for all of the years of my life so far. The yellow duplex across the street with the porch that couples argue on, the large grey house that no one ever enters but that

has a lawn that's always clipped low and a window that oddly illuminates at ten p.m. every night, the fire hydrant and the cracked line of the curb and the sidewalk with weeds growing along the edge of every square. This all must have been here when the old man died in his bed like mine and I wish I had a picture for every decade out this window, to thrum through them like a flip book, to see the grass die and the leaves fall, the snow fill the empty spaces on the ground, the snow melt down into mud and the colorful buds of flowers peek through, the lights in the windows go on and off and the people fight on the porch and then hug because they do still love each other, even around those terrible words.

\*

It was a ten minute walk from the house to the central station where the family could catch a train to Marquette. In winter, snow fell heavy on the tracks, a blinding sleet passing before the engine's massive yellow headlight, and men with shovels worked the snow along the platform while a plow was attached to the front of the train. Throughout town, snow gathered in drifts along home-sides, filling streets and pathways. Peter and his son, Carl, took up snow in careful cuts in front of the house to clear the way to the road. Meanwhile, the boarders cleared snow in the street, which the city hadn't

gotten to yet. All up and down Empire, men and sometimes women, all wearing wool hats, gloves, and scarves, and tall boots, shifted the snow out of the way so the miners could make their way to the pits when the work bell rang.

Inside the house, Anna left the stove on for heat and cooked meal after meal, but if soot filled the kitchen she had to open a window to the icy cold. On wash days, she worked in the basement rather than outside. Peter cleared the snow and scraped the ice from the basement windows so that tiny pools of light shone down on Anna as she scrubbed the clothes. She shaved flakes off a bar of carbolic soap into a tub she'd filled with hot water, stirred the water into a foam, dunked in the clothes, scrubbed them along the washboard, rinsed them in a second tub and took them upstairs to the hanging rack to dry.

The miners' clothes were last. They turned everything rust-red, a color that never came out. Peter's work clothes had started out as pale cotton shirts, brown coats, black pants. Now they were all torn and faded over in red. A red that also tinted Anna's hands as she worked, sinking down into the callouses on her fingers.

\*

We hardly ever eat together at the kitchen table. Instead, Mom and Dad sit at the table and Jerry and I sit behind TV trays in the living room. It's just the way it's always been. I do stay in the kitchen to watch my parents prepare dinner. Mom slides pork chops into a Ziplock bag filled with Shake N' Bake. She stands by the sink and jostles the bag around until the chops look like pieces of bread instead of meat. She takes them out and lines them up on a baking sheet covered in aluminum foil. On other days, Dad has gone hunting and brings dinner home to us. He skins a rabbit out in the garage and tears pink muscle and fat from its bones. In the kitchen, he cuts it into chunks, little pieces that tremble under the knife. He fries them in a pan. I hate the taste of rabbit meat. I tell him it tastes like I picked the rabbit up and took a bite out of it.

“Gamey,” Dad says. He seems to think I'll get a taste for it someday. The extra meat ends up wrapped in ivory paper in the basement chest freezer. It stays there for over twenty years. Mom will never throw it away, and neither will I.

\*

Peter and Anna slept in the ground floor's only bedroom. They wanted to know what was going on in their home. The bedroom window faced the side of

the yard, where they could see into the neighbor's window, shapes moving around in a kitchen, stoking coals in a stove. This room was the only room without another above it, a one-story section of the house. When it rained, the drops scattered closer above their heads. During thunder storms they could pull back a curtain and watch from the bed as angry clouds rolled by. Mid-winter, they listened to the shift of the snow on the roof above them; in the early morning, before dawn, giant clumps of it would fall to the ground, and Anna would awake in fear that the roof was collapsing. Peter slept deeper than her. If she woke, she often got up, in her nightgown, and moved through the shadows of the room. She brushed her hands against the walls and the frame of the bed. She felt, just to know they were there, the few pieces of jewelry she owned, a silver necklace inherited from her mother, a bracelet from Anderson's in town, a wedding gift.

Anna opened the drawers of the bureau, its brass handles cool to the touch, and she buried her hands in Peter's clothes. Until they touched his body, they would smell of soap. Then, when he wore them, they smelled of him: the mine pits, the underground pathways, the dampness. Cold sweat. Oils, gasses, the burnt smells of wicks and coal. She put her face down to the drawer to smell the clothes as they were clean. But the truth was they would always smell like him. She could detect it, even in the drawer.

Sometimes, she didn't go back to sleep, but went into the kitchen and shut the bedroom door behind her. She'd start to boil the water for coffee at

two a.m., and for hours she'd move around the kitchen alone in the silence. Or she'd stand at the window to look out over the backyard, the slight changes in the sky and the trees as night melted into morning.

\*

My birthday parties are in the backyard, and Dad, in a red tank top and cut-off jean shorts, sets up the ping-pong table and teaches me to play. My head barely peeks up over the edge of the table and I swing hard with the paddle to hit the ball back. Mom sets up the wire frames from the croquet set and Jerry wanders the yard with a croquet mallet. When we get bored we climb the apple tree, because there's one branch that's just low enough I can climb up it, sit on it, and not be afraid. I swing my legs.

Mom brings out a fluffy white cake with my name in bright letters and puts it on the picnic table. Grandpa Martin sits next to me when I blow out the candles. For a while the house casts a long shadow over the yard, but when the sun is high enough everything is bright.

Years from now, as an adult, I'll have a dream that my dad is in the backyard again. The picnic table is by the garage, though Mom always left it by the house, and Dad is sitting at it and staring at me as I stand across the yard. He's angry at me, but I'm not sure why. I'll wake up in the same house

in the bedroom I use as an adult, a downstairs room that used to be my play room with a rainbow-stripe carpet and plastic toys scattered across the floor. Now the walls are white and the carpet is taupe, and everything is quite plain, so that I don't have to remember this is once where my dad changed my diapers on a changing table or cradled me before a nap. I wake up in this room, and I think Dad was angry at me in the dream because I've moved on and forgotten him.

But these walls haunt—they always have. There is no way I will ever forget. I see him every single day, usually when I'm standing by the kitchen sink and looking out on that wide span of yard where every year I grew older.

\*

In 1911, the foundations of this house shook with every blast at the mine, causing fissures through the cement where moss would one day grow and where mice would squeeze their bodies, those bendable skeletons, to skitter between ceilings and floors and right through the walls. Every winter a brittle layer of frost coated the windows and icicles hung down like bars in front of the glass. In May each year, as the weather warmed, Peter and Carl climbed ladders to touch up the paint on the house, which the harsh weather had begun to chip away. The two of them made it look new.



Edith sat on a chair in the backyard and read letters, the shadows of her dad and brother and the ladders stretched out over the lawn. Sometimes, a pile of snow remained close to the house in the most shadowed section of lawn. It was brown, melted into a little clump, looking more like dirt. The smell of linseed oil from the paint sank down across the lawn toward Edith where she sat. She admired the smudges of white paint on her dad's coveralls. The way her brother so carefully dipped the brush into the tin bucket. Between the two of them, Anna could be seen through the kitchen window, smudges of flour on her cheeks from wiping sweat away while baking.

Home, the scent of new buds on the mountain ash tree, the dampness of the spring earth. The sound of a train whistle in town, church bells, the first robin of the year fluffing its feathers from its perch on the shed. Horses moving down the street, their manure, the raw odor of the open pit mines where the earth had become exposed. Edith had a sachet of potpourri from the jeweler and she sometimes held it to her nose to transport herself away, if only for a moment, from all things Ishpeming. But when she came back to, the smells of the mines and the paint and the grass were exotic. A transport of their own.

\*

In the basement, Dad pushes chunks of wood into the furnace. The glowing coals light up his face, the tips of his mustache like little sparks. He moves the logs around with an iron fire poker and while he does, I explore.

There are many rooms down here. Nooks and corners. The room with the water tank. The corner with all of the tools and buckets of old paint. The cove at the back, behind a narrow wooden door, where ancient jars of peanut butter and empty glass Coke bottles line a shelf, and where I find a stroller with metal wheels veiled in lacy spider webs.

We use the basement like a pantry, but behind our shelving unit with its cans of beans and soup there are more shelves built into the walls. A circular cake tin, its lid painted with pink flowers. A glass case filled with rocks and minerals. A shoebox full of keys, pamphlets, coins. And beyond the shelves there are still more hideaways, sections cut below the house through the dirt, and I see a shadow of what looks like a pair of boots and an old coat, but I'm afraid to touch them.

In another room I find two *U.S. Geological Survey* books from 1913. They are etched with mold and the pages smell damp, though they are dry. I open the books and touch the pages, the tiny print of the words. The names of the mines all around town. The cobwebs in this room are thick, and deep inside all the webs I can see spider shadows slinking around. Mouse skeletons ornament the cement floor here and there, close to the walls. We

have mouse traps, but they are empty, because all of the mice down here are already dead.

I imagine this basement was once used for work. My dad probably worked down here with his tools, but over the years I will forget what he looked like standing at that counter, a mask on his face to block out dust. Perhaps he mixed paint or nailed boards together. But it may have been someone else, before him, that worked at that counter. A different man that hung hammers and saws by nails on the walls.

Now, the basement is used for the furnace and laundry. My mom washes and folds our clothes down here, hundreds of white underwear and socks, and my dresses, sweaters and leggings. It smells like fabric softener, detergent. But it also smells like the earth. On the back wall, above the freezer, in the furthest reaches of the basement, there's a small window where a plant has grown between the sections of glass. It's always been there, since I first remember being aware of this basement—of climbing down the wooden stairs, of passing under so many cupboards and cabinets where so much refuse has been tucked.

Many years from now, as an adult woman, I'll open one of the cabinet doors, above the staircase, a place I've never looked because when I cared about it as a child I was too small to reach the handle. Inside, I'll find a rotary phone and some fireworks my family never lit, an atlas, and my dad's lunchbox that he took to the mine every day. The lunchbox is immovable, a

monument, yet I pick it up. I lift it out of its sleep and dust, and it still looks like the last day I saw him holding it.

Dad used to be down in the basement alone, maybe working while I wasn't watching. The staircase that led to the upstairs of the house was right above the basement, and I could see the basement lights in the long, open cracks between each set of stairs. I thought if I put my eye close enough to the crack I might be able to see down into the basement, to see what he was doing. But I never did it: I never put my eye that close.

\*

The women left this house slowly, though Edith stuck around. In 1917, Carl left for the war. Of the four children, the two of them were closest, and his absence left an emptiness within those cool walls. The boarders had gone, Anna's father was long dead; Alma and Olga had married and moved on. Edith and her parents stayed on in a house with fewer bodies, colder winters. Edith watched Peter shovel the snow alone. He needed to make space in the winters to park his new car in the yard. He'd start off shoveling with his wool coat on, but as the snow continued to quilt on down he removed the coat, down to his sweater, lifting the snow and throwing it aside and lifting more. Edith began to go out and help him. She wore wool tights and a long skirt as

they cleared a driveway. Edith etched a path to the door, her boots slipping on the glossy ice packed beneath the snow. They finally had street lights and now, when it became dark earlier, she could still see the houses all lit up down Empire Street. She would stop there in the snow to watch the yards fill up with flakes under the yellow lights. Children sledding down the slope of the street. Dogs hopping around in the drifts. Everything so animated, alive.

Carl wrote Edith letters, and she sat on the sofa near the front window to read them. “Hello, Ede,” he started. He told her not to let his friend back home grow a mustache, “even if it is the style in France. I never could picture him with one of those things.” He said, “I suppose there is some excitement in Ishpeming whenever they have a parade of any kind, as the town must be so dead now.” Sometimes, he would ask about the influenza, or whether Dad’s arm had healed from his fall on the ice.

“I am hoping to soon see the day,” he wrote, “when I can put my feet under that old kitchen table again.”

Because, “of course we all know that the Army is not like home.”

\*

In 2013, I move back into my childhood home. It is a long process. This home is full of things, over a hundred years of things. Mom has moved out to a

county road to live with her boyfriend, and she has left behind the stuff of my childhood and hers. Boxes of jewelry she wore in her teens, photos and pamphlets she collected in younger years.

And then, all of the sleepy, dusted over boxes of my dad's belongings. He died when I was ten, and so many of his things haven't been touched yet—not really touched, just shifted around from here to there. I open a cigar box and find his college ID. His hair was so blonde, his face narrow. The box also holds Vietnamese coins, a scorpion keychain (for his astrological sign), his aviator sunglasses. I wear them; they are just a little too big for me and fall down my nose. I'm twenty-seven years old. Dad died when he was fifty. At twenty-seven, he had lived over half of his life.

For weeks—really, for a whole summer—I go through all corners and containers: what to keep, what to discard. In the front hallway, which hasn't been used for twenty years, I find my parents' wedding album. In flipping through the photos I get an ocular migraine from the black mold I inhaled while cleaning. The migraine gives me a visual blind spot, where my dad's face in the photos disappears. I have to lay down on the carpet for a long time, waiting for my vision to return to normal, down on the dusty carpet of the emptying house, and while there I turn to the wall where our television set used to be. I once stuck a magnet to it, and all of the pixels drained down to one dense spot of color, the image damaged forever.

Another day, I am cleaning out the buffet where Mom kept her glass artwork collection, and in a drawer beneath I find documents from the year Dad died. These include the calendar my family used that year. I start to look through it. I get to February, 1997. I can see birthday parties, Boy Scout meetings, scrawled down in Mom's cursive. So many school events, plus all my mom's work shifts, and my dad's own shift rotations: mornings, afternoons, nights. This is how I knew what time of day he would be sleeping: whether he'd be in bed when I got home from school, or whether he'd be waking up when I did to have breakfast with me. On February 24, Mom had written the time of Dad's doctor's appointment to get his heart checked.

But he died of a heart attack on February 22. That's not written on the calendar.

March reads differently. Grief counselors. Insurance and burial meetings. There's no essence of childhood on that page. The image to match March is of Lake Superior, waves crashing on the basalt that lines the beach. But in March the lake is always still frozen. They say the month comes "in like a lion, out like a lamb." Every March I remember ends with snow on the ground.

\*

Generations of the original family inhabit this house for ninety-seven years. Carl and his wife live here through the forties, the sixties, the eighties. When it's time for them to go to a nursing home, my parents buy the house. It's a veterans' loan for my dad, and the terms are strict, the timing must be just right. In all of the red tape, the family tells my parents they can keep what's left in the house when they depart. Gorgeous old glass light fixtures and a standing lamp. Bags of papers and Christmas decorations in the attic. A green steamer trunk with brass hardware, which I will one day open to find a camera, a sweater full of holes, a glossy black shoe. Just one.

In the rafters in the basement, Mom finds a box full of postcards. All written to Edith between 1908 and 1912. Mom finds a paper lunch bag; inside, letters that Carl wrote to Edith during World War I. Mom looks at a few of the messages, but doesn't want to read them. It's too invasive.

But when I'm twenty-seven, I find and open the box. So much of what I've ever known has come from the past, from words I read or were spoken to me about things I never saw.

The first postcard I pick up has a drawing of a man and woman in western attire—cowboy hats, boots with spurs, she wearing a fluffy pink skirt—with a poem printed alongside:



We're Going Some

Look out for us!

Don't raise a fuss!

We're on the shoot, and we'll  
make things hum;

In all the West

We are the best;

Keep up with us

and you're going

some.

Walter Juan Davis

I turn the postcard over, addressed to Miss Edith Carlson, E. Empire St.,  
Ishpeming, MI. A one cent stamp with George Washington's profile on it.

"O. U. Kid," the salutation reads. "How are you anyhow. So long a time  
since I saw you I have almost forgotten what you look like. I saw the big Bull  
Moose this afternoon but his time was limited. Sorry I could not come up last  
night, but I did not get home from work until 4:55 p.m. Could of drove up but  
it was rather cold alone."

No signature.

I used to get letters like this, too. I used to write them. So many days I waited by the window until our mailman appeared. I slid the sharp edge of our letter opener from Yellowstone National Park beneath the flap of each letter, tore the paper open. My family wrote to me a lot after my dad died. This was before e-mail and text messaging. But even afterwards, I still received letters, and wrote them myself. There is the first time a man tells you he loves you, and then the first time he tells you he loves you on paper.

I ran up to my bedroom to read the letters, sitting on my bed next to the window, and I often looked down to the street. The people walking by. The stout shape of the fire hydrant, the rusted sewer drain, our crumbling front steps with their red paint chipped away. Dad once sat there in a pair of shorts, every summer, touching up the paint on those steps. I wish he'd shown me how.

## Shovel and Ground

They start to dig up the bodies in May, when the soil has thawed, has become soft against shovel-point. Up before dawn, the crew passes through the cemetery's picket fence; men line up next to rectangular plots and break into the earth. Light from the stars along Orion's Belt glances off the steel blades of their shovels. Their breath can be seen by children looking out windows when they wake up for school.

This is what it takes to move a cemetery.

*I'm eight years old and Dad and I are digging up potatoes in Grandpa's backyard in National Mine. I have my own small shovel with a blackened metal tip that hits rocks with a clang like a spoon on teeth. Dad has a white five-gallon bucket and he drops the potatoes inside, the soil on them sifting through to the bottom: beetles, slugs, hematite, quartz. Crab apples hang low from a tree, and bright green worms dangle from branches on delicate threads, sinking towards the grass.*

It is 1886, and Ishpeming, Michigan, has two burial grounds: protestant and Catholic. Near the shores of Lake Bancroft, not far from the butcher house and the Barnum Mine, the men and women of 1869, of 1878, of 1884, have

been laid to rest in these cemeteries. Their lives took dramatic turns toward darkness: in the iron mines, they were crushed between rail cars, or slammed against a rock face by explosives, or flooded out 1,000 feet below the surface. They were immigrants and died strangers to all, or they left widows or orphans behind. Beneath timber roofs and beams, they gave birth to infants who died of whooping cough, diphtheria, cholera. Then, they bled out and died themselves, the surgeons with their knives and needles useless against the pump of a heart through a broken circuit. The town's streets saw a constant flow of funeral processions: wooden caskets, men on horses, a creaking carriage. The bodies were put into graves etched out through iron-rich soil, and then the friends of the deceased rushed to saloons or to their quiet bedrooms, frigid for much of the year, and stood at a counter or crept beneath a blanket to wonder, who will be next? Will it be me? Or us?

Every day more people died, and soon it became clear that the lines drawn on a map in 1860 to demarcate the final resting place of the deceased had not been drawn long enough, or wide enough, or far enough away from the town's expansion. The cemeteries penned in by Arch and Main Streets were full, but there would be no stop to the dying. Graves became closer together; families were stacked upon one another. A sense of panic set in—a sense that the dead would crowd out the living, that their scepters would seep into the foundations of homes built ten feet from the cemetery borders.

*Dad drives my brother and me to a small clearing near the Fence River and we pitch our old tent. It smells of the dampness of last year, of autumn leaves and stale rain. We avoid boulders pushing up through the ground and the roots of Jack pines gnarling their knuckles up and over the dirt. Dad has a sledge hammer to push in the tent pegs. Our dog is running around, barking; she circles the tent over and over, leaving a trail of fine hairs blonder than mine. I trek through the woods toward a small stream, brushing my fingertips over ferns and wood ticks.*

In 1882, the *Iron Ore* newspaper urged that a new cemetery was needed. Pine caskets were packed in and the gravediggers had to dig deep, deeper than they possibly could in this town that had once been a swamp, that had been filled in and built up out of mud and mosquito beds. Plots were dug right next to the curbs where parents walked with their children on the way to the store to buy copper-toed shoes. Men worked at night when the town couldn't see, shifting gravestones with their wind-chapped hands, trying to make more room.

Later in 1882, an *Iron Ore* headline: "Get cremated or quit dying."

In 1883, the cemetery was still "packed full." In 1884, no more space in the cemetery. But people found a way: perhaps burying the dead on unapproved land outside of town. Maybe finding places for bodies in the

forest, between the low roots of the maples, under the cover of ferns and long-fallen autumn leaves. In 1885, the new problem was flowers being stolen from beside tombstones. Tulips, roses, lilies disappeared. They were replaced by wandering cattle, broken loose from fenced-in yards and trodding across the abandoned plots.

But in 1886, the new cemetery is ready. City employees put on their gloves, speckled with soggy dirt and the damp shreds of tree roots, and unearth their ancestors. They load them into horse-drawn wooden carts and transport them north of the city. Using respect and care, they draw new plots, mark graves when they can, plant mountain ash trees and weeping willows to shed shadowed branch patterns on a clipped lawn. A gravestone here, a monument there. They take off their gloves, and with the moon of a fingernail they scrape the moss from epigraphs, etch back into vision names that have long been buried with the corpses: *John, Matti, Carl, Anna. From England, from Finland, from Sweden, from Wisconsin. A miner. A miner. A miner. A miner's wife.*

*Baby girl Jolin, into the arms of the lord.*

*Baby girl Beroil, a Catholic.*

They grace the graves with crosses and lambs that over the years will distort into ghoulish figures undecipherable by modern humans. These markers will hover over new graves, and the town's future citizens will sense

souls in the walls of Ishpeming's homes, in lights behind closet doors or in basement boxes that sigh with dust when opened. On Empire Street, on New York Street, on Division and Pine, when the noontime blast goes off at the Tilden Mine and the town's foundations shudder, families will know that something remains of what has been removed, that movement can never mean stability.

*Dad chops wood in the backyard, next to the garage. The swing of his arms back behind his head flits as a reflection across the window. He slams the axe down on maple, mountain ash, sugar plum, birch. Wood chips fly. A mourning dove up on the powerline coos down to us. Back by the compost pile, I pull my fingers through rot and soil, searching for nightcrawlers. A cake of dirt adorns my fingernails. I listen to the blade land heavy on the trunks, the fresh wood split open.*

Within a month, the work is done. Thousands of bodies removed, a new fresh stretch of lawn with neatly lined graves beneath mountain ash trees. Birds flit up for berries and a hot summer breeze pulls through leaves. But at the old cemetery, the earth has been torn, just as at the outskirts of Ishpeming mining companies have ripped open underground veins to retrieve mineral lodes to cart off on trains and steamships. The cemeteries begin to grow back

into themselves: flowers once planted by mourning family members spread out into thick patches of weeds, and young men come by in the evening to tear tulips from the ground to give to their girlfriends. Cows from backyard barns continue to trample the picket fence and make the plots their homes. Milk still dripping from their udders, their knees lock as they press their hooves into loose soil that once held caskets.

*Sometimes, in the backyard, I find a daddy longlegs in the grass. They are difficult to spot—they tumble through blades of grass, a tiny nugget of a body on tender limbs. With care, they maneuver through a tangled jungle. They stand so high. Those narrow legs, so important. I watch them move up the apple tree trunk, wondering how they stick, how they will ever make it. Delicate as lace. Like a bit of foam detached from a bathtub, floating through the breeze.*

When the time is right—this takes decades, it takes the time for more people to die and for others to forget what this place once was—the people of Ishpeming begin to build. On lakefront property, they excavate earth to shape concrete basements and foundations. The frames of new homes emerge like skeletons on an empty stretch of landscape. As they dig up the land, people come across what the gravediggers of 1886 missed: a femur. A tibia. A



rotted-out tooth, or a rib bone—now smudged by iron dust—that had once pressed against the aching lung of a miner. They give these remains to others to dispose of, because they don't want to think about what their house is built upon. And when they have children, boys and girls not unlike the ones that watched a nineteenth-century grave-crew through their bedroom window, the children will play in the yard with buckets and spades until they, too, find something that was left behind, a sternum or another rung of the rib. They may clatter these bones against the fences of their own yards, or they may stow them away in a treasure box. They will tell ghost stories about dead miners tracing across their lawns at night, carbide lanterns still laced with wire to a cracked-open hardhat. And they will tell about tombstones that were moved like furniture, but whose figures rise up from the ground while the town sleeps, because even with the aid of time in forgetting, there will always be clues that the way it is now is not how it has always been.

## A Search

### *The Yard*

November, a dark morning. I step outside at four a. m., lulled by the leftover heat of sleep. Empire Street crowds with shadows and one yellow pool of light from the street lamp near my door. A hush: none of the neighbors are awake. Their sleeping bodies are pulse points I sense when I trail through the frosted grass. I draw constellations between their lives.

This is the time when Dad once came home from work. The Ford rolled up the street with a low engine rumble and Dad parked it in front of the house. When he opened the door, the interior light clicked on, his face still shadowed by the brim of a baseball cap. His flannel shirt illuminated and light bounced off the silver buckles on his lunch box. I never saw any of it happen, because I was still upstairs, asleep.

I walk into the backyard. The apple tree has shrunk with autumn; its branches are bare, and places where leaves and fruit once connected now fill with cool air. It's so dark I can't see much, but I feel the shapes that I know. The dead rhubarb bushes and the limbs of the clothesline posts. The shed, the mountain ash, a rotted mound of leaves once a compost pile. A low wind plots the air and the remains of October rustle in the trees around me. Gray

clouds streak the horizon like an aurora, but it's only the normal predawn sky.

After Dad died I found myself always looking for Orion's Belt—just the belt itself, the three stars in a straight line. Lightyears away from each other, but to an eye on earth, a connected trio. The stars are constant: when the clouds clear, the patterns are there waiting. Thoughts like this kept me safe. A warrior etched in the sky. A big dipper to scoop me up. A little dipper, like a daughter. The North Star, knife-bright. The icy coolness of the morning that kept me awake, aware, stepping on frost nets in the grass as all of the neighbors slept. I searched for terror in the darkness but I never found it. I knew he was dead, would be dead for me as long as I lived. I exhaled, my breath a whisper of white cloud in float toward the stars.

### *The Envelope*

Dad's aunt sent me two photographs. The first, my great-grandparents' wedding. John Wuorenmaa and Josephine Plukka. The second, a family portrait taken at a studio, my great-grandparents and their ten children. In the first photo I see my face in John's. Pale skin, broad nose, small ears. His hands are in fists. He looks like my dad. It wells up inside me: they're gone, all of them gone. John, Martin, Dave. Great grandpa, grandpa, dad.

At first, I don't see myself in Josephine. But then I notice the slight downturn of her lips. The resting frown. I know that's me. Always a thought written in the gaze. Her dress is fluffy white, her gauze veil a long curtain that drapes to the floor. John's suit is so dark it's like a black hole that sucks up the rest of the photo. The two of them appear stunned by marriage.

I turn to the second photo and see their lives withering. Braced in hardwood chairs, their expressions remain Finnish and stoic. Grandpa Martin stands right behind them and I'm reminded of how he went to war. He wrote to my grandmother about drinking cider on a French farm. About the rattle and grease of a rifle in his hand. But here, he looks so innocent. His suit is pressed and a shyness glows in his eyes and after the photo he and his brothers must have gone for drinks at the bar. A whole day went on around this portrait—twelve whole lives went on. And, of course, many lives after, including mine.

### *The Library*

Over the winter I go to the Marquette County Historical Society after class. All of the buildings and the ground are draped in white snow and I have to scrape the windshield to see through. Because it's a dark, cold time of year, no one else researches. It's just me, the gift shop attendant, and the research

librarian. So I have the room to myself as I read articles and flip through photographs.

I wonder everything about the past, but mostly about mines and cemeteries. The passages under Ishpeming, once crawling with miners, now swell with stagnant water. It's pitch black down there: a place the light never touches. But I'm sure we can all feel the emptiness even if we can't see it. At sunrise and sunset the three shaft houses of the Cliffs Shaft Mine glow with the growing or dying rays of the day, and that's when we all remember what used to go on underground.

These pieces fit together a mining photograph: raw cuts in hardrock, where blasts blew a bitehole into the earth. Wooden planks, wet, bracing the rock. Damp metal carts with scrapes on their sides, full of mineral chunks. Men, in pants and boots and filthy shirts, hard hats and carbide lanterns or narrow candles with white flames at their peaks. Noses and cheeks blackened by ore. Sledgehammers and drills in hand. Never smiling.

The librarian helps me flicker through the census records. This library has microfilm, which she tells me is easier to navigate than the internet, easier to read. We find my neighborhood, my street, the names of people that lived in my house in 1900. We find my great grandparents in their home on Barnum Street in 1910. In the slanted script I see a man knocking on the door of their house, taking information down on a piece of paper. I wonder how much English my great grandfather really spoke. What he thought he

was saying when he opened his mouth to shape the words. I see all the way back to the knock on the door, him getting up from the kitchen table. He had no idea he was making history for me when he went to the door to answer those questions. No idea that this is how we would connect.

I scan through pages and pages of documents, trying to understand. City directories tell me every person in town, every business in town, the butchers and jewelers and saloons and general stores. I build a map in my head: Donahoe's and Anderson's and the Jaedecke Brothers. C. B. Myers' Dry Goods, Kirkwood's Drug Store, Walseth and Tislov's Carriages, and "The Palace." This is where my great grandmother went to buy groceries. Here, families purchased coffins and also living room furniture. The city is outlined in buildings, etched by tracks and moving with trains, and a skeleton of water mains flushes beneath the dirt roads.

The librarian brings me Sanborn fire insurance maps and I trace my fingers over the streets. I'm tracing the fires that destroyed whole blocks, the bells and the sirens, men running with hoses and women fleeing with babies in their arms. The opera house and the theater, the hotels and boarding houses, the thousands of bodies and bright eyes and matted hair. The long winters with snow packed solid and horses pulling sleighs. If I close my eyes, I'm there for a minute. I'm at the kitchen table with my great grandfather and as he lifts his coffee cup to his lips I catch his eyes through the steam and

say, “I see you, from a hundred years later.” His eyes, blue, are my counterpoint in the universe.

When I get home from the library I make it a game to climb so high up the bluff by my house that I can’t see the twenty-first century. Only the jagged cliffs cut by glaciers and the tops of the trees. I close my eyes again to pretend that I’m not there—that none of this has been touched by anyone. Branches move and herons lift up to coast on the wind that draws a circle around the globe.

### *The Hike*

I’ve started picking blueberries because it takes me back to a time when I was small enough to be lifted up and carried by my grandpa. He and my dad used to park on the side of the road somewhere and take me into the woods with ice cream buckets to fill with berries. I’d sit down in the middle of a batch, the bushes scratching my arms and spiders and worms sticking to my fingers. Everything on my clothes and skin darkening into a gushy violet.

Because of our Finnish heritage. And so Aunt Esther could bake us pie.

At home, Mom or Dad would dump the blueberries into plastic freezer bags so we could use them all winter.

I pick them with the company of my dog. He rolls around in the tall grass but agitates, tries to climb in my lap. I shoo him away, even yell at him at times

so I can concentrate. My habit is to pick blueberries on the bluff in the early morning before anyone else has thought to leave their house, but I soon discover that no matter the time of day, I'm the only one picking blueberries up here. Every brilliant patch, dense with indigo, is mine. I crouch in them as church bells ring and trains pulse over tracks. In August, I see a bear slinking far back in the trees, and I abandon the blueberry patches for two weeks. When I return, they're all shrunken by the sun and turned ghastly white.

### *The Deceased*

I have read so much about death. Embalming, caskets, funeral parlors, processions, burials, widows, orphans, the left behind. Digging up bodies to move a cemetery. Digging up the earth to construct a home and finding bodies. Tiny white crosses. Tombstones whose engravings have worn away—more from the winters here than the summers. Everything quieted by snow for many months at a time. The autumn that precedes, when the days shrink into darkness and the mornings are laced with rain. Fog cushions the trees and the world is sinister.

When I'm having a hard time, I think about what my dad would do. I can't think of him without seeing his smile. He was always outside, in the forest or on his snowmobile or a pair of cross country skis. His hobbies: to live and to move, to be always in motion. My memories of him turn into the



cemetery, his plot straight across from the Cherry Street sign and close to the trees that edge the highway. His gravemarker is simple, bronze-colored and flush with the ground, etched with his military history. Though I never thought of my dad as a soldier. A hunter, a fisher, a father, a husband, more appropriate uniforms. When I'm thinking about what Dad would do—how would Dad have hope when things seem so bad? If Dad were alive, what would he tell me? I picture his ghost moving through the cemetery. It wears a flannel shirt and dirt-smudged jeans. A sunglasses case in the pocket of its shirt, the outline of a wallet in the back pocket of its jeans. This is a translucent image of my dad. A hologram. It has no answers for me. It just is.

The ghost can't speak to me, but sometimes I have dreams. He's back in the kitchen with a plate of split-open brook trout and he says to me, "You're stronger than this, Annie. You will see me again." I want to tell him that I don't believe in God anymore, at least not the God I learned about in Church, which only makes me remember Dad's Old Spice cologne and pinstriped button-down shirt and the Christmas Eve candlelight service where hundreds of flames kept us all warm. But in the dream, I can't talk back to him: he stands there like a video clip and plays and replays for me. "Smile, Annie. You're fine. Everything will be alright."

I want to tell him: "I'm an adult now, Dad. Please talk to me that way." To him, I will only ever be a ten year old girl on the precipice of a great life. I'm smart, I like fishing with him, I ride my bicycle around town, he's

teaching me to plant carrots and peas in the small garden next to the garage. I'm ten and I have everything in front of me, a whole future to plan.

This is how every man will talk to me in the future: Smile, honey. It's alright, Annie. You're fine. Everything will be fine. You're so smart. Think about your future.

Love is them telling me that I'm smart, that I got this. Then, every single one of them will leave me when they realize that I am, and that I do.

### *The Town*

One morning, after running at the gym—it's still dark outside—I take a cruise through National Mine. It's where Dad grew up. He used to take me there so we could dig up potatoes from a patch in the backyard, or pick apples, or sit at the table in Grandpa's kitchen, my mouth sticky sweet with candies. The light fixtures had an electric buzz, everything a seventies-yellow. Grandpa Martin was slender, tall, and dark, always topped with a baseball cap from his wide collection. His clothes smelled of dusty flannel and his hands perfectly cupped his knees when he sat. From mind to body, he was built of sharp angles.

Over the years, I've heard things about Grandpa's house, where Dad lived for most of his childhood. They didn't have running water until he was in high school. The bathroom was an outhouse, the bath a tin tub in the

summer kitchen. Grandma Elaine washed their clothes by hand; she didn't buy a washing machine for a long time. I can see her in the summer backyard, green leaves in flutter and the grass alive with insects, scrubbing my dad's clothes over a wooden washboard. Her hands raw from hot water and soap. Her mouth fierce as she concentrates.

After Grandpa Martin died, the house was sold and I never went back. But now, at twenty-eight, I want to know it again. So I drive through the old neighborhood to see if I can find it. I take many wrong turns and I discover that National Mine is a twisted, tangled mess. It is packed full of houses, but at this hour, no one is outside; the houses are quiet and the windows watch me. Only a few streetlights scatter about, and here I am, passing under them, a stranger. On top of a hill I find the abandoned high school, where my dad was a star basketball player. The building is a terror there in the dark: glass panes sparkle with starlight and rusted chains wrap the doors.

There's a sigh, which at first seems to come from inside the walls, but then I realize it's coming from me, because I'm thinking of Dad inside that building. Walking the halls in a t-shirt and jeans. He's tall, he's blonde, he moves in a pack with his friends. He hasn't yet been to Vietnam. He hasn't met my mother. His heart is in good health. Red and warm in his chest. I picture it there, encased in smooth white rib bones. It's fueling him on the basketball court and in the hallways. It's flushing blood up to his brain and

the pale veins that trace through his eyes. He was alive once, this man, I tell myself.

After the high school I keep driving up and down and around the roads. I can't find Grandpa's house. I don't remember the color or the size; I only know that it, too, was atop a hill. An image of the backyard is strong in my memory but I know the backyard is tucked back from the road, and I won't be able to see it as I drive. Until dawn brightens, I keep driving, and then people begin to step out to their trucks to scrape the windows and turn on defrosters and I know I have to drive away. I don't belong here, and they stare at me.

That week, I go to my mom's house to ask her how to get to Grandpa Martin's. Her memory, too, is foggy; we need to look at Google Maps with street view to find the house. When we do, I remember it: the front is narrow, the paint is green, and a long driveway stretches along the side. The backyard looks just as it did when I was little, and I'm surprised by how much of my memory was true. I was only five when grandpa died. I tell my mom I remember him in a hospital bed, a needle in his arm with an IV drip, calling my name. She tells me that he had kidney failure and went in for weekly dialysis treatments. She, too, is surprised by what I know.

"I always thought that you reminded him of Elaine," she says.

"Because you were born so soon after she died, and he needed someone new to live for."

I know that if I drive back to National Mine, I will be able to find the house—to look at it. But I never do.

## In the Nerves

The brain is a network in tissue. Glial cells and neurons, the cerebrum and the cerebellum and the amygdala, portions of grey mashed together, a map. Look up images of the brain and you will see soft clay, colors on a diagram, shapes like a dinner side dish. Nerves, built of the thinnest material imaginable, thinner than the weave of a threadbare t-shirt, impossible to look at without considering the ease of tearing the tissue apart. These nerves are tentacles, intelligent and fluid and moving, pulsing with blood and electricity, and they are inside of you. They are what makes you.

I think of the brain and I think of sparks. Tiny lights that flash in star patterns every time I remember my dad. Every time I bring back to life something that once was. That still is, there in the nerves. In the sparks that travel down the thinnest tissue.

At night, when I'm sleeping and my brain is shooting sparks and I'm unaware, I dream about my dad. We're in the backyard of my childhood home. Dusk: the sky dim, but I know it's Dad there with me, wearing his red flannel. We stand beside a campfire ring, a low glow within, where Dad must have built the fire. He was always good at that: chopping the wood, sharp edge of an axe, arranging the logs in a teepee pattern. Match to kindling. He used to dump lighter fluid out of a plastic bottle down into the coals, at which

my mom flinched. The danger of the flame traveling up the fluid line to Dad's body.

The dream is simple: Dad steps toward me and hugs me. Tight. The firmest feeling I've ever had in a dream. He doesn't say a word to me. He just holds me. Dad must know I wrote about him last week. I told him to stop talking to me in dreams. To stop telling me it would be okay. Now, all I know is that the flannel wraps around me. I can feel the warmth of a body, a life. I wake up, nauseous with this thought: *you're still alive*.

I've had dreams before in which Dad had never died, but this one is different. I don't believe it to be true. I know he's been dead for years, and I know exactly where his body is, how he looked in that casket so pale and quiet in a grey suit with a pink tie, though I've sometimes transformed the memory to flannel and a fishing cap. Aviators and a false tooth. A hand with a gold wedding band. The way I wanted it to be. How my mom now says it should have been. But she was scared and alone, my mother, and she had to make some difficult decisions, and now she doesn't dream about him like I do.

In my early twenties, I went to get my hair cut at the usual salon by my regular stylist. But she was out on maternity leave, so another woman cut my hair instead. As she clipped away, she began to tell me about how she had

just lost her boyfriend. The father of two boys. Eight and ten years old, they now had to live without their dad. He had died in a snowmobile accident. I had likely heard about this on the news. Every time the local station reported a snowmobiling death, I thought of the parts of the trail I used to ride with my dad, jumps grated into the path so that the machines could fly high into the air, and the closeness of the snow-covered trees beside them—how solid a trunk could be in a frozen January. Frost etched on bark like a weapon, branches spears with icicles draped on their shoulders. The menace of the cold air, the sharp stars on a black sky, the punched-out hole of a moon.

The woman started to cry. Her hands shook against the silver scissors, so close to my scalp. I had to tell her that when I was ten, I lost my dad, too.

“And I turned out okay,” I told her.

“What do I do?” She said. “What can I do for them?”

“Just let them be. They’ll find their own way.”

Then, she tells me: “I never see him. He never talks to me. He has been sending them signs. Why am I all alone?”

Mom said the same thing to me, once. The only time she ever heard from Dad was many years after he’d died. Out in the backyard where she always used to stand and smoke, the stars and outer space, midnight sky, gemstone stars and planets, the cold winter air. He’d sent her a message—spoken to her. Given her hope. As if this was all part of a bigger plan, this



great sweeping timeline of her life. My mom has lost too many of the people close to her. Her mother, her best friend, her brother, all within two years. Cancer, cancer, suicide. To the point that she no longer cries when someone disappears. Mom has learned to accept it.

I know that on that night that he spoke to her, she felt better. Maybe it was the only sign she ever needed. Some of the rest of us need more, or at least something different.

I remember reading an article about quantum physics that I barely understood. It said this about a photon sent from across the galaxy, barreling toward Earth: “One could also choose to ‘peek’ at the incoming photon, setting up a telescope on each side of the galaxy to determine which side the photon took to reach Earth. The very act of measuring or ‘watching’ which way the photon comes in means it can only come in from one side” (Walia).

So just knowing how something happened, made it happen that way. Caused it to come into existence. Shaped the history, the path.

I’m thinking about a scatter of sparks in the brain. The trail of a ball of light down a circuit, like a lit fuse. What I know about my dad. What I remember. What’s true, and what isn’t. What the truth even is. My truth (I saw him holding his chest the day he died, I saw his face), my mom’s truth

(she held his hand as he reclined on a white-sheeted gurney in a hospital), my brother's truth (we don't talk about it).

I sit on the bed, in the bedroom that once belonged to my parents, and shuffle through photographs. Dad in a tank top, his arms pale. Dad crouching beside the Grand Canyon with a flood of light on its cliffs. In his waders in a lake, holding up a fish by its gills, its red throat drooping down toward the water. Dead tree stumps statuesque in the lake around him. Dancing with his mom at a wedding. Sitting at the edge of a bed in a hotel room with my mom, a beer in a coozie in his hand, his mouth gaped open into a laugh around his missing tooth. So many pictures of my mom's grin, her bold, bright teeth. Images of Mom in sweaters, on skis, with my dad, without my dad. I find landscape photos and I hate them because my family isn't there. But then I imagine the person behind the shutter, Mom or Dad, the gentle click of a fingertip and the still, tranquil stance of the body, and I feel okay because the picture is proof enough that they were there.

My parents took so many pictures. They developed them and saved all of the negatives. Then, they put them into a box in the front hallway for twenty years. It's only when I'm nearly thirty that I start to look at them. The pictures bring back stories, or allow me to think of new ones. If a photo was taken before I was born or at a place I never went, I tell myself what my parents did that day. Maybe Mom sat in the passenger seat for miles on an empty highway and then they ate at a roadside diner, and both of them

ordered steak and French fries and drank coffee. I even imagine the waitress in a blue dress sidling around the restaurant, coffee pot in hand, a reflection of the parking lot in its glass: the car my dad drove. A Buick. A Crown Victoria. Mom's hair pulled back in a ponytail. Dad's sunglasses folded on the table. Like the road trips I've been on with boyfriends, when we sit together over our meals and talk about all of the things we saw that day: the animals (deer, buffalo, big horn sheep), the sights and moments (the Badlands, the heat on our shoulders, that man who took our picture), the things we will remember the next day and the things that will soon dissolve forever. The you-and-I memories, the thin tissues that hold us together. I try to access all of this for my parents because it turns out my mom is alone in these memories now. I'm not going to ask her about them, though, because I'd rather build up any number of things that could be true, and leave those as her own little treasures, locked away.

From a box, I lift a photo of our long-ago campsite by the Fence River. A stand of narrow pines with a small clearing in the middle. The tent is tan and brown, its aluminum poles meeting at angular joints. A green Coleman stove sits atop a folding card table that's been covered with a wrinkled tablecloth. Lawn chairs sit beside a fire pit, and Dad turned over a white, five-gallon bucket to use as a side table. Roots etch the dirt as skeletal remains, and

sunlight, bright behind the trees, lands on a bed of ferns. On one tree branch, a propane lantern; on another, my dad's blue flannel shirt; on a branch beside the tent, Dad's mesh cap. The only person in the photo is me: I stand at the edge of the campsite, my back turned to the camera. My legs slender in pink pants, a grey sweatshirt topped with a drape of blonde hair. It's hard to see exactly what I'm doing, but it appears that I, too, am holding a camera and taking a picture. Just like my dad was. I'm facing out toward the river. It's a picture I may never see.

I'm stuck in the tar of all of this science, this memory. I have to paint pictures with it to make myself begin to understand. A map of the brain, neurotransmitters and receptors, the tiny, candy-like balls of molecules, jagged lines of electricity shooting lightning bolts beneath the skull. White matter and grey matter, the synapse points of communication, diagrams I can build with a pencil on a sheet of paper. All of the lists my dad made that I can now look at and trace with my finger and see him writing them with the fluid movements of his hand.

Shutdown: sparks of light snapping back up the darkness of the nerve cord. Electricity flickering out. When I was young, I unplugged my bedroom lamp and received a shock because the wires near the plug were bare with

age. It zipped up my arm and I laid back in my bed for a moment to make sure I was still alive. My body sucked the power up, and I continued to breathe, but I was shaking. I remember the light of the spark, how I was sure the bedspread would set fire. Instead: stillness.

“. . . How we choose to measure “now” affects what direction the photon took billions of years ago,” the article says. “Our choice in the present moment affected what had already happened in the past. This makes absolutely no sense, which is a common phenomenon when it comes to quantum physics. Regardless of our ability make sense of it, it’s real” (Walia).

## The Bee

I.

Before you said goodbye to me, Dave, I said goodbye to you. On a weekend in Kilkenny, a Christmas gift from your parents. We had just toured the castle, which, across a long lawn, looked like a hologram, turrets and iron gate. Pink flowers nestled where foundation met ground. On the inside, a plush dining hall with polished silver goblets and flags hanging from the ceiling. They didn't flutter—no wind—and it was cold.

In our hotel room, I said goodbye. The hotel was next to the River Nore, and in the mornings at breakfast I watched that river moving by, like a strip of ribbon on a wheel turned over and over. Breakfast was bright, from sunlight to eggs to raspberries, the orange juice and the glasses for Irish coffee. Our hotel room, though, was shadowed, especially when rain clouds gusted into town.

After the castle tour we walked back to the hotel. You held my hand; I let you. When we arrived, I laid back on the bed to look up at the ceiling. I spread my arms out across the blanket—one of those secret garden floral patterns that you can't look at too long or you'll get lost in it—and I pretended I was sinking. I knew it was all over between us, but I could still see you in the corner of my eye. You were sitting at the desk, in a chair,

wearing a white hoodie, writing something on a notepad. Goodbye, I thought. I knew then that I'd break up with you over the phone, which is what we're never, ever supposed to do, but it would be easier if I didn't have to look at your face.

## II.

When times are hard—it could be that I had a bad day, a bad month, a bad year—I go to the cemetery.

My dad's grave is directly across from the sign for Cherry Street. Cemeteries have their own little streets, their own little maps, like neighborhoods. The graves, tiny houses. I once had a Sesame Street play set with red, yellow, and blue plastic houses, and a plastic-asphalt road down the middle. None of the doors to the houses opened. I just moved the plastic characters down the street, or left them on the sidewalk.

Sometimes, at the cemetery, I've only made it as far as the tree by the Cherry Street sign. I think it's a weeping willow, but maybe I think that because what I usually do is sit there, in my car, and cry. One day, a storm was on its way and the branches on the tree shook. I heard a loud crack outside and I was sure the tree was about to fall and kill me. I let myself enjoy this for a while—an ominous cemetery—but then I sped away.

But most times, I do make it to Dad's grave. I took a boyfriend there once, after having not been for a while, and I couldn't find the grave-marker. It's flat to the ground, given to our family by the military. Nothing fancy, because gravestones are expensive.

It was November at that point, and Dad's grave was covered in a thick bed of decaying leaves. I thought someone had stolen his gravestone and I panicked about what that meant. I kicked the leaves around with my boots—I know it's here, I know it's here—and then I found it. Guilty, because I hadn't remembered exactly where it was. When I saw it I had to remember that my dad was dead and that's why I was here.

Those times probably matter more than the usual visits, when I feel like I need something from my dad, even if it's just to calm down, and I show up alone. I sit in front of the gravestone and spend a long time primping and cleaning it with my hands, guiding my fingernails around the edges of the letters to clear them of dirt:

DAVID MARTIN WUORENMAA

The highway is beside the cemetery and you can't shut off its rushing sound or its bright flash of passing cars. But what you can do is look up at the trees and then close your eyes and focus on the sound of leaves moving, wind



and wood. It's hard not to think there's something alive in that wind. A continuance.

When I sit in front of his grave in the damp grass, and put my hands down on the stone, and I shut my eyes, I feel all the way down to his bones. I feel them in my blood like a magnet. I've been all over, and there's no place in the world like that.

III.

I know a woman lived in my house long before me, over a hundred years, the nineteenth century into the twentieth. There are some tiles missing in our downstairs bathroom floor, exposing wooden floorboards. When I look at them I wonder if her feet touched those. If that was where she stood when she looked in the mirror and fixed her hair. In our attic, I touch the wooden beams and wonder if she touched those. I think about her in my bedroom, sleeping, a once-warm body. The rise and fall of her chest as she slept, a nightgown, a husband, another warm body.

I think of her on Main Street, downtown Ishpeming. In the early 1900s, it was all cigar shops and general stores, bars and liveries and furniture makers. I see her near the corner where Buck's Restaurant is now, lifting her dress from the mud—her boots are much shorter than the ones I wear, up to my knees, where hers only hit the ankle and have delicate

buttons on them. She's surrounded by men, horses, wooden wheels, the first electric lights, the first and only city hall, the timber houses that would burn down, the clang of the railroad tracks. Her hair is up in a bun, but if you look close enough, strands of it are falling down.

When I walk through town I think of this woman and the drape of her dress, the mud at the ankles. The hair so carefully fixed in the mirror; the eyes, the eyelashes. There were plenty of other people that lived in this house—I've seen the census, I know the names—but it's her that I really care about.

#### IV.

My mind lands in Riga, Latvia. You and I had a twelve-hour layover there years ago, Dave. We arrived at four a.m. in early February and stood at the bus stop in a windburn, under a black sky and in a flood of florescence from the airport. Cuts of light fell on your pale skin, and when we breathed, it crystallized.

Our bus pulled into the city against a stripe of dawn in the distance, blue twilight lifting, and you and I walked around forever, the only ones there. Snow piled against the windows of chapels and townhouses. We emerged into the town square, buildings all iced and frosted. We found a tiny,

cluttered gift shop with a lone woman behind the counter. I bought a necklace: Baltic amber.

You took a lot of pictures of me and later, when I looked back, it would seem I was in the city alone, and I would like it that way. Face raw and chapped; eyes red from the flight. I can only imagine you behind the camera: all of the cold places you followed me. How I always wished you would wear a hat.

V.

Dad wrote hundreds of letters to his parents from Vietnam. He asked them to send him food, to write to him. He often told them that he didn't have time to write much, but the letters continued to fill their mailbox in National Mine. Red, white, and blue markings around the border of the envelope. The sheets of paper inside were tiny and when Dad was done writing his letter, he wrote notes to fill the margin of the page.

“Write soon.”

“Killed 3 water buffalo yesterday.”

“P.S. Mountains sure are high here.”

“P.S. Beautiful weather, how's the weather in N.M.?”

Dad and I had ten years together. My brother and I used to sit on my parents' bed so that Dad could set up the projector and show us slide shows from Vietnam. The photos were old and yellow, my dad in military fatigues in the sand, in the jungle, with Vietnamese children, in the shadows of army tents, holding tin plates of food, his mouth mid-chew. In his letters, Dad told his parents he would explain all of the pictures when he got home. I don't remember him explaining them to me. I don't remember him talking to me about Vietnam at all. Yes, I saw the photos. But he was silent when he showed them to me.

I want to ask him questions.

I scour the letters for things I care about, like him writing about the Upper Peninsula, or about the landscape, or about what he ate. The things that I would write about now. But then I come across passages like this:

About six days ago I left with the company and went back in the mountains. I had quite a greeting. As soon as we landed on the [Loading Zone] we were hit with AK-47 fire and turned out to be a pretty fair firefight. I kept my head low though. We lost 12 guys, guys from the company, 4 K.I.A., also lost 2 helicopter pilots and 2 doorgunners. It was terrible seeing that bird get shot down and fall into the jungle. But, it's one of those things we have to face.

Could this possibly be my dad? Was this my dad, standing there with a rifle in his hands in the middle of the jungle, watching a fiery helicopter plummet down through the trees?

I watch documentaries on Vietnam. I watch movies about it. I try to put my dad there. I think of him with a gun and I remember him in the snowy forest on his hunting grounds. He was tall, even among the trunks of the pine trees. Paul Bunyan, a flannel on. I had to stretch my neck and tilt my head back to find his face under the hat and behind the mustache. Vietnam, Northern Michigan, the snow, my dad. Now, when I imagine it, I see blood on the snow. It's deer blood, not human blood, and if I linger long enough I can call up the fur, tan and white, the hooves covered in ice, the blank-black eyes.

When I read these letters, I wonder if my dad ever killed a man. I'm afraid one of them will tell me yes. And he's not here for me to ask. But would I ever really want to?

He wouldn't write that in a letter, I tell myself. He would keep that with him until the day he died.

## VI.

When high school is long over, my classmates remember me as, “the one who went to Ireland.”

“She was always going to Europe,” they say. “Always flying somewhere over there.”

I never thought this was how I would be remembered. I was a nerd, a goody-good. Never popular. Now, I’ve become the jetsetter. The one who took off before the rest. But I kept coming back when the rest of them didn’t.

## VII.

The woman who lived in my house: she took trains. People wrote letters to her, and Mom found them in the basement, and I read them. She took the train from Ishpeming to Marquette—but sometimes, all the way to Chicago. That’s a long distance journey. Now, it takes me six hours to drive that far, and I have to focus on the pavement and traffic, not the landscape.

This woman watched the world go by through the train windows. First the thick forests of the U.P., then the growing cities. Houses where people stood in windows with coffee watching the train go by. Stations where people stepped off or on, suitcases and buckles and coats. Tears wiped from faces as the steel rung over the tracks.

The first time I visited you in Ireland, Dave, you took me on a train. It's true I had been on subways and metro lines, but I had never seen the world like this before. Back home, passenger trains were things of old, expired. A train, to me, was a car filled with iron ore pellets lumping its way across a highway overpass. Or snaked out on the ore dock in Marquette, a chain of rusted metal. To you it was Point A to Point B. Dublin to Belfast. Dublin to Cork. Dublin to Galway. We took those routes together, and more. The backsides of Irish towns: rooftops, gardens, doorways, a quick flash of a person, an arm, a leg, a bit of hair. Just as quickly, we're rushing past the salty shore, the big foam of the ocean. Your warm body next to me. The low hum of people chatting, the slosh of beer in plastic cups. A clink-clink noise as a meal cart rolls up the middle aisle.

A world outside that rises and unfolds and shrinks in seconds.

## VIII.

Moments I remember that I never saw:

1. Grandpa Martin asking Grandma Elaine to marry him. He's about to leave for France. In a backyard, he kneels before her. She wears a cotton dress, hair in curls, hands cracked,

blueberry pies and farm animals,

cows pigs chickens milk bacon eggs,

she says yes and he rises from his knee and holds her. Drags his fingers through those blonde curls. Cheek to her ear. His gaze is across the yard to an apple tree wild with ripe fruit.

2. Mom and Dad meeting in a bar. They sit at a bench along the wall and chat. He drinks Old Style beer. She's not old enough to be in a bar. But she drinks rum and coke. Mom looks like me, but with brown hair. She is just a little more adventurous than me, a little more able to do things that I wish I had done at age twenty. Dad has that shiny look in his eye, like a candle through a window.

3. Dad in a rocking chair, holding me as a newborn. Those eyes looking up at him were mine, and I wish I could have them back.

IX.

If I had a sister, things would be different. It wouldn't always be like this with men: I meet you. I love you. I leave you. You leave me.



What I'm saying is that if I had a sister, I might understand how to operate with men. Or, she might be a better version of me. The one that loves right, the one that stays. She might know the things that I don't. I'm not saying it would be better, but it would be different.

Maybe there's already another me out there. She has the feelings that I can't—that I won't. She still loves the men that I loved, still locks their gaze. She holds their hands when I let go. She marries them. Her dad is still alive. When she has a baby, they have a grandfather. He holds them like he held me as a child. Those little tots always want to go to Grandpa's house. They want to go fishing and camping with Grandpa. He tells them all of the jokes that used to make me laugh that I can't remember anymore.

I don't want the material to be perfect. This woman still has my body with all of its curves, the misaligned jaw, the pigeon-toed foot, the tiny, breakable wrists. The body that I fear will shut down on me before I'm ready, that I push to the limit, hiking up hills and slunking into valleys. I'm thirty. Dad died when he was fifty. This body fears the decades, the markers of years: ten years old when dad died. Forty years older than me.

The better me out there, she has the body, but not the fears. She wears the motivational quotes, the self-help books, the marathons, long-term relationships, the family, the holidays, the everything that makes her content and in love. She knows how to live without being anxious about death. She is the one who writes the happy stories I always erase a moment after they are

typed. She has no trouble falling asleep at night in bed next to her husband. He trails his fingers through her hair down her arm and holds her hand. She is safe.

X.

One day, I'd like to ask my therapist why my memory is snapshots. Why does my mind call up certain flicks of moments? This odd video reel?

Paris: we went to a café and I ordered a croque madame. The walls, the chairs, the floors of the café were a dark wood, probably mahogany, the circular table-tops glass. The waiter wore a half-apron, black-and-white striped. He was friendly.

Barcelona: we're walking down an avenue, Dave, when a young girl in a hoodie and sweatpants says "tsk-tsk" at me from a doorway. I question you and you tell me she's a prostitute. The avenue is lined by blank trees (it's winter) and a smatter of string lights.

Helsinki: we're so cold. We hold hands with our gloves, a thick kind of hand-holding, fingers white. I let go of your hand so we can look down at the unfolded map. We have no idea where we are. We walk into a shopping center and I sit on the stairs and cry. This is my first day in Finland.

Dublin: we stand at the bus stop on College Green. This happens over and over and over. We wait for the 14B. You wear a denim jacket. Your hand, in

your pocket, turns coins, rubs them together. The iron fence around Trinity, dark green bushes, the bulk of the university pillars and turrets, open street before us, headlights building horizons on the pavement, Grafton Street, the bank. The gift shops with music you sing along to though you tell me you hate it, how Ireland becomes such a joke in all those songs.

The Christmas when we went to your grandmother's house and everyone in your family gave me a gift, candles and hand creams, and I could see on your face that you were so happy to have me there with you, but I kept thinking about home.

XI.

Mom tells me about a night that I wouldn't sleep. She stayed up for hours holding me in the rocking chair, back-and-forth, back-and-forth. She wore a nightgown, the kind she wore when I was growing up, white flannel. Mom has always had mermaid hair. Long, dark, far past her shoulders.

She rocked me, the hair in cascade, the room dim. She sang. And then, I looked right up into her eyes and sang back at her.

## XII.

It's a delicate situation, informing someone you love that your dad is dead. It gets easier as you get older because there are more dead dads around you. More fatherless daughters. Especially in my town, where fathers die young. At thirty, it's normal, right? At thirty it's normal for your dad to be gone?

In your twenties, men have a hard time understanding. In bed, arms around you, they whisper that they're sorry. Wow, that must have been so difficult. I can't even imagine. Such a loss when you were so young.

It makes you special to them. It makes you different. It makes you someone who has suffered, and for some that's good, and for some that's bad.

I might be trying to tell them, this is the person you'll never understand. This is the part of me you'll never get. I sit alone in different rooms at my house and look at pictures of my dad. Fishing, flannel, hunting, orange, skiing, snowshoes, lifting me up in our backyard, baseball caps tank tops jean shorts ping pong table croquet set apple tree rhubarb patch. I've built a life out of memories. I'm trying to meet someone that neither of us will ever know. And you should know now that I'm never going to let it go. That I'm going to carry it forever and it's going to float through my head like a malaise every day. My dad, nearly seventy now. My dad, in a burial plot, in a rotten oak casket, bones adorned with brass hardware. What's left of him now, down there in the soil. What's left of him on earth.

### XIII.

Dave, one thing that we had in common was waking. You stayed up until dawn. I woke up hours before that. We sat in darkness together, in the scope of that time frame, in the overlap. You drank bottled beer and I drank tea from a mug. I pulled back the curtain to the night sky. In Dublin, a simple dark palette with clouds underlit by a city of low buildings, of monuments. In Michigan, all the stars and constellations, the aurora.

Only a few cars drove by. Lights, all around town, off. It was so quiet, and I should tell you now that it still is, and I'm still here. I wake up alone and sit in front of the picture window. I leave a string of holiday lights up well into January, into February. Cosmic reflections on the windows of the house across the street. Flecks of light poured out over the snow. I notice a neighbor awake: shoveling, starting their vehicle, at their kitchen window with a coffee pot. They exhale ice clouds under hats, over scarves. Once in a while, they look up at me.

### XIV.

Mom tells me about a hunting season, when Dad had a terrible cough and couldn't shoot a deer because they all heard him in his deer blind. I think of the rattle in his chest with those coughs, the coldness of the middle of the woods, a canopy of pine needles, branches low with a burden of heavy snow.

His heart attack happened at home. We don't know when it started, but we know when it ended. I imagine it a slow event, an unfurling. A pinhole in the aorta. Punching out a little more blood each day. A seeping, like a tiny hole in the ice, water below. It took a while for Dad to feel it. We can't know what's going on in our bodies. What's under my skin, traveling along my bones, cased in my ribs: as much a mystery to me as planets, galaxies, the heat that comes off the stars, the millions of lightyears of travel that can bring us closer to nothing at all, a place with no gravity, entirely unknown.

That's why none of us knew until it was too late. The day before he died, Dad didn't feel well and he reclined on our sofa and I brought him a bowl of soup and sat on the carpet in front of him. The TV was on and during a commercial break I turned around and put my hand—so small then—to his forehead, which burned against my skin. He had a fever. So much heat and energy that would soon be sucked right back up into his center. But where would it go? How could I not feel it anymore?

We don't know exactly when it started, but I saw the moment Dad knew. His hand over his chest.

His face.

His panic.

He knew then what was happening, but he didn't tell me. I know now that he didn't have to. There are pictures of him showing me how to fish, how

to play pool, how to open a can of beer, how to speak how to breathe how to love. How to look into the eyes, always make the eye contact, laugh. Everyone tells me how much my dad laughed. But when he was dying—

The stories we tell are stories of action. “He sat in his blind. He couldn’t stop coughing. He was so upset that year. He never did get a buck.”

Movement of the chest, phlegm in throat, ice on mustache, heat of breath.

I still have my dad’s clothes, his fishing gear, his guns. All cool to the touch, absent of his scent. I have a box of his jewelry and his aviator sunglasses and his licenses, the documents he signed, the pins he wore on his uniform, the Vietnamese currency he held in his hand when he was younger than I am now.

What we leave behind can only last so long. It’s not ours anymore and really, it belongs to no one.

XV.

Items in the basement of my home:

A tourist leaflet about Ishpeming from the sixties

A two-shelved glass display case with rocks and minerals inside

A dust mask

Empty mouse traps

Dad's snow suit

Dad's swampers

Quilts, mouse-nested

A metal shelving unit housing non-perishable food:

A plastic bottle of crystallized honey

Cans of soup

Chow mein noodles

Kidney beans

Cranberry sauce

Goop hand cleaner, for grease and grime on skin, perched by the wash tub

Paint cans, the contents solid

A saw

A box full of keys

A lump of clothing pushed back into a cubby hole

I opened the dryer in the basement once to check if I'd left any clothing inside. Instead, there was a bee. It had flown in through the dryer vent.



Lethargic, but alive. I coaxed it onto a piece of paper and covered it with a glass, then took it outside and deposited it directly onto a dandelion. My boyfriend at the time told me that it was probably going to die anyway. I didn't stick around to find out. I left it there, clinging onto the bright yellow, its wings moving like a pulse.

## XVI.

I sift through a box of letters and postcards written to the woman who once lived in this house. At the bottom, I find a Swedish prayer book and a sachet of potpourri from Anderson's Jewelers that no longer has any scent to it. The things that are left of her now that she's gone.

I imagine her in a church pew, her skirt draped over the edge of the wood. Or sitting on her bed at night, in a nightgown, the prayer book laced by her slender fingers. The jewelry she bought—or that was bought for her—tucked into a pine jewelry box on a dresser. Necklaces, rings. Gemstones.

I had a special jewelry box when I was little, and it now seems a part of every girl's princess story, that jewelry box her mother gave her. Mine was covered in blue and pink floral fabric, the clasp bent for as long as I can remember. When I opened the lid, music tinkled, a ballerina twirled. The ballerina's tutu was the tiniest piece of white gauze. Her plastic arms lifted and her fingers touched.

When I went back as an adult to clean and sort my old bedroom, the jewelry box shifted somewhere and the music began to play. I had to dig through jeans and picture frames and magazines and colored pencils and piggy banks and ceramic figurines to find it. I lifted it from its place and closed the lid, but the music kept playing.

## XVII.

I allow myself nostalgia because all of you are gone.

I live in the past because all of you are gone.

In the darker times I wonder if there's anyone as left behind as me, and though I know there are, and some people have it worse, and some people really have no one at all, or had no one and started over, still I allow myself nostalgia as a way of life. It is how I cope.

The only thing I'm sure about, when it comes to desire, is that I want to be able to go back and live it all again. To travel back to those moments with you the same way I pack my bags and go to the airport and check-in and hand a boarding pass to an attendant and sit in my seat and drink ginger ale (surface quivering with turbulence) and feel the landing in my guts, the hard slam onto the runway, and step out into the gate in a different airport in a different city. The way I save up my money all summer from working at a gift store when I'm twenty-nine, almost thirty, and I cash every paycheck and put

that cash into an envelope in my desk drawer so that when summer is over I can board that plane. Fly away.

Dublin, I can fly back to. But it's not the same city that I land in anymore. That's not because of the port tunnel, or the Aviva Stadium, or the Revolver, or the Luas, or the things that are there now that weren't before.

It's not the same because of you.

I told you, Dave, that I sit by the window pre-dawn to look out at a dark town. The house across the street, the people exhaling ice-breath. I'm thinking about when we walked to Tesco for apples and bread and pizza, how Tesco is still there in Rathfarnham, the Dublin suburb where you grew up, with people moving around inside like plastic figures buying plastic foods. Because without being there, I can't be sure how much of this is real.

To the people shoveling or scraping their windows or standing over their sinks with coffee pots, I might look like a ghost. Pale, a blankness to the eyes, no movement. I'm sure they wonder why I'm awake.

## XVIII.

More moments I remember that I never saw:

1. Dad's first steps. In the front yard of the family home in National Mine.

He's wearing onesie pajamas with white round buttons. Holding the side of a red wagon, he lifts himself up. Moves his feet. His mother watches from the porch. His dad stands beside a pickup truck, lunchbox in hand. Everything is still, except for Dad, one year old, walking.

2. My parents' wedding.

3. Dad in a helicopter over Vietnam. Thunderous chop of blades, a never-ending whir, jungle and palm leaves, mashed to ground; animals fleeing, shooting stars.

Dad jumps to land, his boots a thud. Everything brown-green around him, there are no other colors, the world is different.

Adrenaline. What rushes blood from the heart. What increases its flow to the muscles. Dilates the pupils. Makes us run.

He holds his gun to his chest. He takes one step, then another. When the helicopter flies away: quiet. The fading rustle of leaves and the swish of

the fatigues on those around him. He looks up at the sky, a vast sweep of blue. Then he notices them: the echo of shots constant as lake waves. Faint as the gentle fluff of snow he left behind at home. He's not afraid, my dad. He knows what he has to do now. He turns toward the jungle, dirt and grease smeared on his face, his hair blonder from the sun (even beneath all of that grime), clothes clinging to his skin. He steps toward a thick wall of trees; he disappears.

XIX.

If I go fishing now, and I put a nightcrawler onto a hook—one, two, three holes into its coiled body—I remember Dad showing me how. If I ignore the size of my hands now I can imagine I'm ten and he's standing behind me, watching me.

Telling me, don't worry about the guts.

Telling me, it's only a bit of blood.

The sticky skin of the worm against my fingertips. How its parts seem so simple, the one single line of its body. Dad says, this is part of the natural cycle. This is how we catch the trout. We don't get grossed out. We do what we have to do. We work our fingers like knitting needs to tie that worm to a metal hook. Telling me, see the way it still moves, even after it's been sliced open? There's still life in there. See the way it moves?

## Honey

. . . it's wonderful. I can't believe it's you. You have been worrying, I can see that. Honey, you sure do look sweet. You really look the tops and so pretty, that my eyes, just can't believe it. Now I miss you so much, that I'm afraid I'll go crazy. Got my radio (transistor), stationary, & envelopes wet when I fell in a stream. I threw the stationary away and the radio is dried out now & working fine. The weather's been miserable for the last two weeks. It's been raining and breezy. Everybody seems to have colds and coughs. My cough isn't very bad now and my feet are in good shape now. I never had the chance to have my teeth checked. There's only a little nicotine on them. I'll have them when I return, don't worry. I listen to good tunes every night in my hutch with a candle burning. Sure is lonely though. I sure miss home, didn't know how nice it was until I came over here. I understand you have a bike now, honey. How much did you pay for it. Is it one of the latest types, or one of those old ones? Now, don't go and hurt yourself, honey. I know, that you can ride a little at least, so there shouldn't be any reason for getting hurt. The French people are swell. They treat us nice, and trade eggs, and milk, for our cigarettes and candy. They are happy, because they are free now. This was written in my fox hole some where in France. Temperature: about 90° / Loc. – Khe Sahn / Time – 4:00 p.m. / Days Remaining – 186 / 7 APR. 68. I finally found a bit of time to drop you a line and let you know what's

happening. I was just dying of thirst and we happened to cross a stream, nice cool water, I filled my canteens, sure was good. With my buddy's 126 instamatic camera I took some pictures of me digging a fox hole near the L.Z. It's not bad at all here, just like sitting in the backyard at home. There's been steady air strikes and B-52 strikes with helicopter gunships pounding the area. Boy, the area around Khe Sahn is so cut up with bomb craters from B-52's and jets (F-4 Phantoms & Skyraiders) it's not half as bad as they say it is though. How's the fishing? In one letter you told me how you had cried, and how you scolded your little brother, for spilling milk, on the cellar floor. You really must be upset honey. Please don't act like that, towards any one. You are over worrying yourself honey. You must relax and try to forget about this war, because it will drive a person nuts, in the end. Don't scold any one for a small incident like that. I use to be like that, years ago, but the army woke me up, and I realize now, that all people have a heart, and that is some thing. I don't want to break on any one. I know what a broken heart is honey, and you do also. We left Camp Evans about a week ago and we still haven't patrolled, just been making a fire base for artillery to get a little closer to the Laotian border to aid troops in that area. We've been making bunkers, laying wire, digging foxholes and mainly pulling security for the artillery battery of 6 guns. Aside from that working, plus cleaning the land, I've written letters, played cards and talked with the guys. I'm tired of being separated so long. I know you are too honey. This can't go on for ever, we know. This war should

be all over by xmas at the most. It sure would be nice, if I did get home to you, on xmas Eve. I think, that would be a real nice time to meet after this long wait. Honey, are you taking good care of your self? That worries me, more than any thing else honey. I want you to be just the same girl, as when I left you. It's nice to see Planes going on Raids over here. I've seen, so many, that I don't even look up no more. We really got an air force honey. We are on a fairly high hill overlooking the flat land to the east all the way to the coast. There are mountains in all other directions cover with jungle terrain. The weather is in the 80s and 90s (sorry to rub it in like this) and a nice breeze blowing too. I just returned from Protestant services. My feet have a little jungle rot on the bottoms, nothing serious. I don't have a smoking cough anymore. I have 207 days to go and a couple 'till R&R. I wish I could have attended the ski tournaments but it's one of those things. I haven't written to anyone else but my own family, just not a letter writer anymore. Here it is July, and just about one year, since I was home. It seems ten years to me, and I know it's the same feeling with you. Incidentally, I just ruined another camera. It got wet last night, they just don't last over here. I've two more rolls of film taken in Japan to send home. Too bad about that Seablom lad. I'll admit that it is bad over here and people should have a little more feeling for G.I.'s in Viet Nam. I didn't know him and it sure is horrible. He was probably mine sweeping a road. I miss you, Dad & the kids more than anyone else in the world. Stay healthy & don't worry. I understand you, and your ways, and



the will, you have to work, and take care of a home. I know honey, it takes a lot of good points, to make a good wife, and you really have all them points. I know, our future, will be a grand one honey. Don't worry.

## Tilden

### *Him*

When he returns home in the evenings he stands in front of the bathroom mirror to unrim the iron dust from his eyes. She watches as he slides soaked cotton beneath his eyelashes; when he pulls it away, the cotton is black. He tosses it into the trash can.

Next, he angles a cotton swab between his fingers and runs it through the track of his ear, looping around corners, a collection of dark smudges that gather in the fibers of the swab.

He smells of soap, of gasoline fumes. A day's worth of fresh sweat purging up through the skin. Of metal. Grease and mineral sludge scrubbed away in a communal shower. Of the hard water that rushes through a narrow fixture in the wall, a pool of brown foam gathering at his feet—feet remarkably clean through all of this, but ankles rubbed raw by tightened boots.

### *Her*

She edges forward to touch his neck. It's been stippled red by the collar of his shirt; a callous has begun to ripple where a respirator strap rubs his skin.

Something about the brightness of the yellow bulb in the bathroom: dust in all corners visible, threads from towels caught along the edge of the sink. The rawness of a post-shift body, the narrowest of purple veins edging through delicate skin around the eyes. She thinks of fire coils, of furnaces, of all of the lights that daily illuminate this face that only she really sees.

### *Him*

Hours before dawn, he tries not to wake her. Beside the bed he slides open a dresser drawer to lift out pants and shirt. His eyes adjust to the moonglow framing each bedroom window, the pale greyness of the room. Over its silence he hears a faint rushing sound outside, a far-off winter wind. Then, his ears realign to the sound of her breathing.

She sleeps. In the dark, the room's only visible motion the rise and fall as she inhales-exhales. Her movement becomes a mosaic of other mornings, days off, waking to the rustle of her body turning towards his, of a warm leg crossing over his thigh, fingernails sweeping the back of his neck. The heat of the space between her neck and the pillow.

He sinks beside her now, sits on the very edge of the bed, nestles his hand into her hair. She doesn't wake; she's in a deep sleep, her consciousness far away. He touches the arc of her cheekbone and the line of her jaw—

balusters, beams—he sweeps his fingers along her collarbone, broken at age three, a knot in the middle where tissues fused.

He marvels: the smoothness of her skin. By nature she shifts, turns her face in his direction. Lips to her forehead, he smells the rooted fragrance of the day before, the moments he missed as he shoveled or shifted gears, the sweet potato and cinnamon and moscato, the dryer sheets and lavender oil, the snow and the candle-fire braided into every part of her.

## Holiday Season

I once worked at a shopping centre in Dublin where a machine piped out artificial snowflakes over the front entrance to give an impression of Christmastime. Rain fell almost every day there, the sun a globe through a gauze of cloud, and the snow shimmered down onto slick puddles of rainwater lifted from the Atlantic. White lights lined the mall's glass doors, falling onto a gleam of pavement like an illuminated ice rink. Inside the mall, at the Butler's Chocolate Café, scarved couples loosed rain drops from their umbrellas and brought cups of hot cocoa up under their winter-pink cheeks.

Irish children thought Santa hailed from Lapland, where men and women with skin toughened by the winter cold wore thick mittens and ran them along the velvet of reindeer antlers under the veil of the arctic night. The Christmas market at the Dublin Docklands offered toasted almonds, ceramic mugs of glühwein, Finnish cups carved from birch burl. Silver lights flickered along the branches of trees and glowed onto the surface of the Liffey River. Perched on a carousel, kids looked up from the North Star to a cold chunk of moon, hoping to see the sparkling, icy blades of a red sleigh.

Far away, my childhood Christmas Eves had been dinner at my grandparents' house, apricot meatballs in the slow cooker and my cousins and me tearing through folded and taped wrapping paper. Late into the

night, Dad would drive us home; the stars were steady in the sky, brilliant as the points of ice picks. The world we went through then was a haunt of white. Fears of skidding off the road, of the solid spider-crack of windshields and headlights, of a purple sheath of frostbite over your fingers as you dug yourself out of a ditch or the scarlet blood of a deer hide scraped across frozen asphalt.

Winter was powerful. Dad drove us home with care, through an odd circus of Christmas bulbs, Santas, and plastic reindeer. We moved toward the safety of home: the furnace pushing heat as a shield through the walls. Before I went to bed, I put my hands to the radiator, watching as my mother draped my hat and mittens on its rim, snow melting in a stream to the floor.

## In Between

*Age seven:* my Dad took me to the top of a bluff on his snowmobile. We saw the rooftop of every house in our town, gauzy trails of smoke leashed to chimneys, lights aglow in windows. Stars flickered above, ice holes in the sky.

*Twelve:* two years after Dad died, my friends climbed with me. We sat on a granite peak. Trees loosened leaves from branches; bears shuffled in blueberry bushes. Deer leapt from the brush, matted ferns in their wake. We felt their warmth when we put our hands over where they had been.

*Twenty:* I climbed alone. In autumn the sugar plums sucked into themselves, dead grey beads, and the trail I followed, dull with red iron ore, moved like a stream beneath a mesh of pine needles. Partridge lifted from bushes in chaos. It seemed to take forever for them to fly away, feathers caught in branches.

Dad once hunted partridge. Over the kitchen garbage bin he snapped back their necks and sliced open their crops: bright red choke cherry skins and seeds. Dad smoothed the mealy debris over his fingertips to show me what the birds ate. A raw smell from their bodies. Their eyes dark, hardened to plastic.

*Thirty:* I went up the bluff to see the aurora borealis. Mom had taught me to look for them from our backyard, eyes to the north. To not mistaken the pale glow of the gas station lights against the clouds as the aurora; to discern their green sweep from the incandescence of our town. I sometimes wondered if the difference mattered. Still, I searched.

The iron mine that had shaped my family was south of the bluff. Where Dad worked, winding a production truck along a trail, down into a pit and back up again. In that direction, the sky was a fierce, unnatural red. But to the north: green, grey—a veil, a spirit—arcing over the hills. In constant movement, so difficult to find, and so soon to disappear. It was March, the ground frozen, but I sat on the snow with my boots buried to plant me.

I wondered what people thought hundreds of years ago when they saw this phenomena. If they were afraid. Did they think it was a god? Or many gods wrapped into each other, the way humans do when enduring a storm? But I felt I had no more answers than they did: what I loved was the mystery.

*Six months:* Dad used to carry me up the bluff when I was too young to walk myself. I wasn't old enough to shape clear memories, and yet I remember it. Being small, wrapped in a blanket, flannel against my cheek, what the sky looked like with a head tilted back, blue eyes that caught all the light.



Dad took me there to show me how things look from up above. A temporary world—the Jack pines, the streams, the atmosphere, the universe. The snow that fell, then melted. The lights that shimmered, then swept back into the darkest night.

## An Excavation

This is Ishpeming, Michigan: 1851. Two men—Sam Moody and John H. Mann, of the Cleveland Company—live in log shacks amid mountains of ore. Mineral veins curve along bluffs and the wilderness is thick with cedars, maples, ash. Deer weave and lunge between trunks. Trout fling up pink and silver from lakes.

Here, Sam and John clear the trees at the edge of a swamp. They have one stove between them. They sleep in one shack, eat in another: venison, salt pork, trout flesh charred over a flame. To stake their claim, they plant potatoes. When Peter White arrives, he finds Sam in a tuberous frenzy, spading out the potatoes, filling tin buckets with the fragrance of damp earth. Beetles and worms skitter through the roots. Bucket in hand, Sam leads Peter to the top of a hill and sweeps his arm across the landscape. He has half an acre planted with potatoes, carrots, and parsnips. His intention is to hold the land by spade until he can say that it belongs to him. The uncut rock, the solid lumber, the leaves lush with swamp-scent, are a part of a vision, to be chopped and mined and burned and melted until this green valley has become a town.

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Ishpeming, Michigan: 1996, February. By five p.m., twilight slicks the sun back into a strip of violet at the edge of the city. I can already see the stars.

Dad pulls his Polaris snowmobile from the garage. He has cleared a spot in the snow to let it rest while he checks its parts. I watch as he—wearing snowpants and a green flannel shirt, no coat on yet—flips back the hood, unscrews a lid and pours oil into a small tank. He turns a key and the headlight illuminates, casting white light through the smatter of snowflakes. When he pulls the cord and revs the engine, a puff of smoke shoots from the exhaust, blended oil and gasoline fumes that will thread their way through his clothes until my mother washes them clean again. The exhaust cloud twists up into the night sky, a smooth fade, and I think of our toaster in the morning, of campfires by the Fence River, of all of the things that we do to make smoke.

We go for a ride. First, east to Eighth Street, where we climb a bluff at a sharp angle so we can circle the base of the Ishpeming water tank. Here, everything is in view: Wabash Circle and the empty shell of the Mather A Mine, steel rail tracks taut out beside U.S. 41, Lake Bancroft—frozen over and white as the dust on a donut, the tailings pile of the Empire Mine that grows taller even as we watch. The night is darkening, and though we are far above town, when Dad brings the engine to idle I hear Shepherds bark in backyards and see lamps switch on behind indigo curtains. A boiler fires up at the IGA grocery store: a sharp sound that pulls the city together, just like

the noontime blast at the mine and the ten o'clock curfew siren from the fire hall.

I look down to the roof of our house, just two blocks away on Empire Street. Its brick chimney emits a cloud from our wood stove, and I swear I can smell its spent birch ashes, see wisps of bark flit up and drift away with sparks still on their backs.

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Ishpeming, Michigan: 1858. There are seven houses between here and Marquette. They are built of logs and rough-cut boards. Miners have come to start drilling, three men to a drillbit: one holding it, two hammering back and forth to draw a shudder through the rock. When they sleep it is in tents, or in C. C. Eddy's Boarding House, the mining location's first building. Here, immigrants from Cornwall and Ireland set their tin lunch buckets beside mattresses cloaked with sweat stains and a thick sludge shaved from iron cliff-sides. Outside, great clouds of mosquitos tear at skin, tiny needle-mouths already caked with blood. Smoke from smudge fires drives them away.

Miners eat venison torn raw from the bones of deer shot by lantern light on the banks of the river. With hooks and lines, dull sheens pale as spider webs, they pull brook trout from Lake Angeline. Their life is made up

of this work, of carving out hematite. A plank road of cross ties and iron straps gives way to the Iron Mountain Railway, and locomotives pipe into the location to tug ore-filled carts down a steep grade. This is the village's only contact beyond the hills. When winter comes, the men hole up with few provisions, snow falling in thunderous clumps from the branches of white pines, rabbits padding across the landscape under moonlight hoping to escape gunshots.

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Dad guides us down the slope of the bluff, along a maintenance road to the banks of Partridge Creek. The stream cuts through snow, this flash of movement in the stillness. We pass houses built a century ago, now sinking into soft earth, their foundations cracked by the rattle of nearby explosives. In the cold, Dad brings us by the Brownstone and the Cleveland Engine House, where a hoist once traced ore up through the bottom of a pit. He takes us along the curb of Division Street, because in Ishpeming snowmobiles move like cars, and he lingers in front of Wilderness Sports, where fishing tackle lines the window. Dad waves at men in trucks turning off South Pine towards Buck's Restaurant. His face, from brows to cheekbones to tawny mustache, is

covered with a ski mask, but the men recognize him by his snowsuit, his helmet, and his daughter riding with him.

We glide back up to Hematite Drive, where other sledders are out on their way to the Rainbow Bar. There, they'll drink beer and whiskey. On the Jukebox they'll punch in Tom Petty or Alice in Chains. Then, they'll fly home under the fire of a two-stroke engine, atop a sprocket wheel and a rubber track, and show up to their wives or girlfriends with the heat of the alcohol on their breath.

Dad is careful to tell me that people die on snowmobiles here. Sometimes, they try to cross the highway and a semi-truck finds them before they reach the other side. Other times, they flit through the woods until everything around them shreds into a blur of ice and pines and they hit a stump and careen into a ditch. Or, they drink and then they ride home, and before they know it they aren't on a snowmobile trail but in the middle of the forest, where there aren't enough fences to cordon off the dangers, and where what looks like a snowbank could be the last ledge before a landscape spills down into a solid rock pit.

Their last breath is exhaust fumes, and their last sight is the sideways shift of a terrain that's been torn apart for the metal inside. Dad doesn't tell me this, but it's what I come to understand.

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1869. Mr. Robert Nelson has built a store. He has constructed a slaughterhouse by Lake Bancroft, which the Native Americans have deemed bewitched and forbidden, but where the settlers spill blood for meat. Now, Nelson decides that it's time to settle the swamp. He purchases, for \$470.50, a tract of land, a sore of muck, a breeding ground of darkness. From local mines he gathers wheelbarrows of refused rock and fills the swamp. He builds up through the stagnant water, chops down trees, diverts Partridge Creek. Ten businesses appear in four months, among them St. John's Church, Donahoe's Shoes, Cornelius Keough's saloon. This will be the city.

Dr. Bigelow is in town, healing the wounds of miners who came too close to a pig iron furnace or a sheet of falling rock. H. Asgaard arrives with only the clothes on his back, in from Norway, and opens a furniture store. There are more like them: everyone is like them. They are here to make money and to live. There are children in town, now; by the light of kerosene lamps they watch miners come up out of the pits and in through the doors of boarding houses, their palms leaving dark smudges on battered pine. They splash water on their faces and soak their arms up to their elbows in tin basins. When the miners speak, their different languages roll up through the floorboards like the call of a candle wick's burn: Cornish. Swedish. Irish. Italian.

With spring's arrival comes the flood of Partridge Creek. Murky water sinks the clapboard buildings. Their foundations loosen like worms from

damp soil until they crumble away. This water will return and return, after dozens of inches of snow fall and then melt with every season's cycle, and the boiler in City Hall will one day sag into the earthen floor of its basement, and the city will decide that the creek must go, buried or tunneled away. Patrons drinking coffee at the Blue Star Café will say: "Why the hell did we build a city on a swamp, anyway?" Still, they will never leave it.

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We pass the Mining Journal Office, the Rock Barn, the fire department, the Express gas station where Dad stops to fill the tank. In my snowpants and boots, I track a trail of muddy snow-melt through aisles. Headlights of cars passing through a nearby intersection gleam against the windows, where shards of ice have splattered patterns that obscure an outside view. But I can see my dad talking to people as they all gas up, the nozzles like strange pistols tucked into glove-grip. Dad points toward the station and I know he must be talking about me. He likes to tell people that at nine, I'm a damned good ice fisher, and that I already know the best secret spots in the county. I step outside, back toward the Polaris, under the flood of the station's florescent lights, and when I reach Dad he takes off his gloves for a moment



to wipe snowflakes from his eyelashes so he can see, and then to pull my hat further down over my ears to keep me warm.

Back on the snowmobile, we head up towards the abandoned Cliffs Shaft Mine. It's what people know of, if they know a little about Ishpeming: two concrete headframes from 1919, a square-edged Koepe Hoist from 1955, a stone boiler house, and engine house, a laboratory, a dry, a blacksmith. We all grew up around these shapes. Beneath us are sixty-five miles of mine tunnels, shafts 1,300 feet below ground level. A city below a city, right at the center of town. Stopes wide enough to hold a 747. The place where my dad's father worked. Where he, along with thousands of others, shone a lantern from his hard hat down a long, dark cave, loaded chunks of debris into clanking mine carts, stepped into a cage to be drawn up through a shaft toward daylight.

Though the land we are on will one day be fenced off, we can travel it now, and Dad winds us through the dusk under steel beams and iron trusses, beside branches of trees that brush against stone walls. Electric lighting remains, even after everything else has shut down, and the city has placed an illuminated cross at the top of the tallest headframe. Within this network of light beams is a path through the snow imprinted by the other men and women that have ridden through the industrial graveyard. A few flakes of snow shed from low clouds. Rubber treads over ice on the distant city roads, the sliding doors of the SuperValu glide open so people can buy hot pasties

for dinner, the rotary kiln at the Tilden Mine slams pellets into solid form at 2,400 degrees, and my mom sits at the Oddfellows bingo hall on Main Street daubing a square card with green circles. But within these mining grounds, it's just Dad and me.

He stops the snowmobile to brush chunks of ice away from the ski mask around his mouth. We stay there in silence for a moment, and then we're on the move again. The exhaust cloud we leave behind us dissipates, quick as ice to flame.

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1874. Ishpeming has received its city charter. Its population tops 6,000. F.P. Mills is the first mayor. The city has a network of wooden water mains, a fire department—which some say is more of a social club, a hospital, a grammar school. Iron mines close in on the city, are a part of it: they move as the city moves, they sleep through the winter as the city does. The miners within them earn \$1.50/day working ten-hour shifts, and they spend their wages on room and board, on corned beef and salt pork, on rugged boots to withstand the ore dust, on alcohol. For a time, Ishpeming is lawless enough to be known as “Hell Town”—a breeding ground for thieves, for swamp sludge, for vagrants to roam. Where Alex Nelson, in the middle of the night, will

slaughter forty hogs in a pen beside the Salvation Army Hall in response to their noise and odor. Where men will attack women after minstrel shows and where sexual offenders will be called out weekly by the *Iron Ore* newspaper. This is a mining location: shadows from the jagged, shredded underground always find their way to the surface.

It is in mid-April, when winter has only just begun to fade, that a fire starts at the hardware store. Those on watch notify the fire hall immediately and thousands of people pour into the streets. Firemen in tall boots and shielded caps with rows of buttons down their coats rush to the scene to cut into the fire plugs and bring up water. But the fire plugs are frozen. Negaunee, a town only a few miles away, is alerted by telegraph, but their fire forces don't make it halfway to Ishpeming before a fire in their own city calls them back. This is a time of wooden homes, of feather light curtains and gas lanterns: it only takes a moment for a spark to turn to blaze.

The men and women of Ishpeming dump their goods into the streets. Shawls, dresses, overcoats, plates, snuffed candles, cigar boxes, piles of meat and potatoes land on the snow-dusted dirt. Skis fashioned from barrel staves, with bottoms that have been polished with stove ashes, reflect the light of the fire as they are gripped by children's hands. Fathers hold their daughters, as their daughters hold rag dolls with stitched eyes and mouths. Families surround stacks of their few earthly goods and watch the town burn. It takes hours for the firemen to get to the water that trickles below the city, and by

the time they have, two blocks of the business district have been incinerated. This is a relief: before the last flame went out, many thought the fire would take the whole city and leave them with nothing.

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Across from the Cliffs Shaft, Dad shifts us towards home, rotating around the fringe of Lake Bancroft. The trail we follow crosses the remains of the Protestant and Roman Catholic Cemeteries, uprooted in the twentieth century and moved to dryer soil north of the city, rotten caskets and tombstones loaded onto carts drawn by horses. There are bodies beneath us, a stillness in the air, the cold silence of a pitch black that chills us through our coats and hats. The lake itself is quiet, though schools of fish swim under the membrane of ice, their hearts slowing for the winter, the sun shining through only where someone has shattered the surface.

For our final run, Dad takes us north to U.S. 41, the path out of town—the strip of pavement that, here in the twentieth century, makes us part of a circuit. Near the traffic light where Lakeshore Drive meets the highway, Dad guides us up a slope to the side of the railroad tracks. This is where, in the summer, he takes me to collect iron ore pellets that have fallen from train cars, with the vague impression that perhaps this tiny pellet was shaped

from ore he himself extracted with the production truck he drives at work. Pellets that leave a trail behind them all the way back to the mine. Pellets that dust a red sheen onto his palms.

But in the winter, these pellets are frozen over, and all we can see is snow. Dad hasn't taken me up here to collect pellets, but to pause before we go home. City lights glance upon the bottoms of night clouds, cars roll by in an astronomy of brakes and high beams, and all things are moving, even the pines on the landscape that only appear to be so still.

## Suicide Hill

Every winter, on a Saturday morning in February, my dad used to haul my brother and me out of bed to watch the international ski jumping competition in Ishpeming, Michigan.

Hot cocoa, flannel blankets, snow pants with ridged buckles. Dad had a Ford F-150, brown; he'd put my brother and me on the seat beside him and drive us down a county road to the towering ski jump. A timber contrivance, its frame had the slender legs of a fawn, knobbed and riveted. A grated slope ran down from the top of the frame, with a white and snowy lip at the bottom to propel a skier, boots splayed into a V, out over a landing pad gleaming with ice.

Dad climbed with us up the side of the hill to the base of the ski jump. The announcer's voice, calm and mathematical, filtered from a speaker above. *Number thirty-two, Terry Grahek, USA. Number forty-seven, Lars Aagaard, Norway.* I'd still hear it when I went home in the evening, the distant call of names and numbers echoing through our walls.

All around, there were languages I didn't know: Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, German. Young men in skintight slips of ski suits, bright blues and oranges splashed over their arms and legs to help them be visible in the

snow. They smiled at me, patted my head, and sometimes shook my small, mittened hand. “Onnea!” They would say to one another. *Good luck.*

When it got too cold, Dad put us back in the truck. Its radial heat sank warmth back into my skin and we watched the ski jumpers fly like deer over fallen trees. At times, a man or woman would land the wrong way, a limb flailing and cracking, coming loose from the network of their bones. I grew to fear these moments, but couldn’t look away.

Men like my grandfather—with his heavy wool shirt, his hat with Sherpa earflaps, the Styrofoam coffee cup that trembled in his hand—shuffled around the ski jump, telling anyone that would listen about 1954 when Rudy Maki jumped 300 feet or about Paul Bietala, ten years old on his first jump, who later died when he skidded over glare ice and hit a post. These men know about the cement foundation, the fir beams, the sweaters knitted by wives in the 1930s, who, over mashed rutabagas and marinated venison, told their boys that the sport was too dangerous, that they should only watch their dad when he jumped and never do it on their own.

Now, looking back, I think of my own dad: his brown and red scarlet sweater thick over a thermal shirt, the gray knit of his winter socks snug at the tops of his boots, his gloves big as a yeti’s fist. He was a piece of insulated machinery, oiled blood in all of his parts. With utility, he turned the key in the truck’s ignition to start the engine; with steadfast and smooth clearance, he climbed to the top of the ski jump with me on his back. He had no fear.

When night sank around the ski hill, it left the whole of us in a fluorescent globe, the lighting angled solid over an icy tarmac. It was silent when each competitor appeared at the top of the jump, their waxed skis edging out over nothing but air. There was a thump when they began their descent down the slope. Like the rest of us, Dad held his breath as each skier came off the jump, marionette-like and fragile in the air. But unlike the others, Dad honked the horn of his truck before they landed. As if they weren't there for the landing at all, but for the flight. As if those five seconds in the air were what he had pulled my brother and me out of bed for, to listen to the horn crack through an atmosphere brittle as grass beneath snow and wait to see which way the skier would come down.



## I Can't Sleep at Night, Though My Blankets Are Warm

Living as an adult in the house I grew up in means that when the furnace kicks on in the middle of a winter night, I waken to the darkness and remember my dad in every room. He makes shadow puppets on the ceiling of my upstairs bedroom, he fries a brook trout and an egg over the kitchen stove, he projects images of the thick and jungled hills of Vietnam on the living room wall. On Christmas Eve, in the bathroom, wearing a striped button-down, he spritzes on some Stetson cologne before the candle-light service at Bethel Lutheran. He's in a rocking chair in the corner of the dining room, holding me as a baby—this little bundle of blanket and blushing skin I've seen in pictures—wearing his Sorels because he just came in from shoveling snow, but his hands are warm from the lining of his gloves.

I see him in the living room, in a recliner, reciting basketball scores to my mom, the room thick with the smell of pork chops and Brussels sprouts, just cooked. Then he's in the backyard, a beer in one hand and a ping-pong paddle in the other, playing a game with a neighbor. He's in the backyard, washing his truck with a bottle of wax-wash, the hose, and a yellow sponge. Or he's loading the truck with a cooler, fishing poles, cross-country skis.

And then, I remember the last time I ever saw him: he's in the hallway, in a flannel shirt, as my mother is about to drive him to the hospital.

His heart is exploding in his chest, he's scared, he's walking out the door and getting into the van. I see his silhouette as they back down the driveway, my mom in the same pink coat she'll be wearing when she returns hours later, alone.

Living here, I waken under the same roof my dad woke up under every morning. When I rinse out my coffee cup, water splashes down into the same sink where my dad once ran cool water over the split-open bodies of fish he'd caught, over their exposed flesh to make them clean. I look into the bathroom mirror and I pause before I brush my teeth, because in the curve of my cheekbone I can see his face, and I remember being within these walls when he gave me Trenary toast and Wheaties in the morning and clicked off my lamp in the evening, and when, under the threat of a snowstorm, he told me to not be afraid, that it meant in the morning we'd build a giant fort out of snow-bricks and inside it would be warm even if the blizzard's wind continued to swirl.

## Sledding

When my grandpa Martin died in 1991—an ashen figure beneath a sheet on a hospital bed, all latched up to PVC tubing and with an IV drip hanging like a lantern near his head; the first person I witnessed leave this world and had to ask someone why— he left behind a tract of land in Republic, Upper Michigan. It was a hunting ground tucked far north of U.S. 41, with two broad fields, a thick enclosure of pines, and a stream. In the summers after my dad inherited the land, he would build campfires of sizzling, sap-filled maple branches at the crest of a long slope, sitting close enough to the flames to soften the rubber tips of his boots. The fire-glow would illuminate the dark blonde tips of his moustache and cast a strange highlight to the underside of the brim of the Cleveland Cliffs cap he wore.

In fall, he'd use the plot of land for target practice. He would pin sheets of paper to trees, put his eye to the sight on his rifle, and hook his finger around the trigger: precision. He'd collect rotten apples for deer bait, drawing them up from the damp soil and grass and dropping them into a white, five-gallon bucket. Deer would often graze in our fields before hunting season began, the weight of their antlers heavy on their heads, and my dad would stand at the top of the slope with his arms crossed to watch in admiration.

And then, when winter arrived, Dad would take my brother, Jerry, and I to the land to go sledding or chop down a Christmas tree: a needle-loosened pine that we would haul home to my mother. She would decorate it with the delicate glass ornaments she had been collecting since she and my father had their first apartment together in Ishpeming, Michigan, the same town where I grew up.

At the age of seven, the drive from Ishpeming to Republic—only about half an hour—felt like such a journey. Each winter, we'd climb into Dad's Ford pickup—I was always in the middle, being the youngest, three years younger than my brother—and glide from an ice-covered Empire Street to Third Street to the highway, turn left, speed past Pamida, Country Kitchen (where my mom worked), and Cone Corner, and hit the open road.

Dad listened to tapes. He had every volume of *Cruisin' Classics* from the Shell gas station: artists like the Drifters, and the Supremes, and Smokey Robinson, who sang my favorite song, "Tears of a Clown." The summer after my dad died of a heart attack in 1997, Cleveland Cliffs, the mining company he'd been employed by since his twenties, celebrated their 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary by inviting the Drifters to perform at an event in Marquette's Superior Dome. I'm not sure if the members were the same as they were in the fifties—surely they couldn't have been?—but I remember sitting there on a cold, aluminum bench in the dome and watching them sing without my dad next to me, and that was an emptier feeling than anything, this moment that he would have

loved but could never be a part of, how preposterous it felt that I was the one watching, ten years old, half as old as dad was when he first heard them sing “Under the Boardwalk.”

When we headed to Republic in December, Dad would put in *Billboard Greatest Christmas Hits*. Sometimes, my brother’s best friend, Lars, would come along, and we could all sing The Drifters’ “White Christmas.” Dad had the deepest, loveliest baritone, like the rumble of the ground in Ishpeming when a mine blast went off at noon and you knew it wasn’t an earthquake but the manmade sound of the earth loosening just a little beneath you, just enough to bring out the ore and for the people in town to earn their wages, and for that reason it was a comforting sound, and a needed sound, and you road along it knowing, in the way that it trembled the coffee cups in your white cupboard, that it was what made you safe. That’s what Dad’s voice sounded like.

Under summer’s heat, once we hit dirt or gravel, Dad would let Lars and I sit in the bed of the pick-up, jostling around from the bumpy road and getting dust in our faces. But during the winter, we usually stayed in the cab while Dad plowed right through the drifted snow, into the faint reminders of tracks left from our last visit. Ever so often, he stepped out to shovel our way through thicker passes, snowflakes gathering wildly on his moustache. Jerry, Lars and I got out of the truck, too, to scoop snow out of the way with our mittens. While shoveling, Dad would sometimes stop to brush encrusted snow

from his hunter's orange hat and let out long breaths that formed crystallized ice streams in front of his mouth. He'd take off his coat, roll up the sleeves of his red flannel, and continue shoveling, there in the middle of nowhere in his bib-style snow pants.

“Need my Yooper scooper,” he'd say. A Yooper scooper is a large, sheet metal snow scoop used by residents of the Upper Peninsula to clear snow prior to the advent and popularity of the snowblower. Dad always used one to move snow out of our driveway in Ishpeming, and I often hopped on it to be dumped at the top of a bank in our backyard. But even without the scooper, Dad was a master at snow-clearing, daunted by no storm.

In Republic, at the end of the road my dad had to plow by hand, we came to a tiny travel trailer he had set up long ago, in a spot at the edge of a field that sloped down toward a stream and the forest. I could imagine Dad pulling the trailer to Republic with my grandpa in the passenger side of his truck (years before he died, Grandpa Martin was no longer allowed to drive, though he often got away with it). My mom said they looked alike: tall, rugged and Finnish, strength in their arms and in the crevices and roads on their faces, shadows cast over their features by baseball caps, but my dad more often with a smile showing that his teeth were not quite straight. Grandpa must have helped Dad set up the trailer: with no water or electrical hook-ups to be concerned about, Dad must have stood at the front of the trailer and wound its stabilizing pillar into the ground while Grandpa stood

inside with a level to ensure the camper sat solid and even on the land. Then, I bet they thumped open the grimy, plastic Playmate cooler and drank Old Style beers. The sun always sank so fast over that land: one minute, clear brightness, the next minute, that syrupy sort of deep darkness that transforms trees into rows of grave, silent figures brushing their branches against one another in the coolness of night, that makes everything that was pale in the sunlight—the walls of the trailer, Dad’s crooked teeth—glow grey, that hushes the woods at its arrival before the hoot of an owl or the chirp of a frog in the stream at the bottom of the hill tentatively reignite the liveliness of the forest and Dad and Grandpa step into the trailer to finish their beers and say, “Hey, old man, we done it,” to each other.

Over the summer, during the few weeks at a time that we’d be away, mice would move into the camper; we’d step in to find nests chewed into mattresses and droppings that my dad would brush away with his long, flannel sleeve. I’d find evidence of mice on the paper linings of drawers and in the corners of cupboards, and I’d wonder how they got in there, what magical device they had to employ to navigate these hidden places. I never saw a living, breathing mouse in Republic, and I don’t know where they went before our arrival, but at night, when I slept, I felt sure they were in the walls, their little hearts rapidly beating, their delicate bones trembling under the power of those little hearts, their blood whirring around those bones so close to me

as I rested my head on a cold pillow so far from any people except for my family.

In the winter, the trailer became a frosted outpost, no living things inside. Dad would use a pick to chop ice off the door handle while Lars, Jerry, and I brushed snow off the camper windows and peered in. To me, it was a dollhouse: a tiny table that converted into a bed, a bunk near the ceiling where I would unroll my sleeping bag, and a stove and refrigerator that didn't run, like toys. Dad set up a propane heater and a Coleman stove, and he hung a kerosene lantern from a hook on the ceiling, the stinging scent of gas snaking its way into our lungs.

While Dad disappeared into the trees to collect firewood or skirted the periphery of the land to staple "Private Property" signs onto trees near where unfamiliar hunters might try to set up a blind, the boys and I lifted our plastic sleds from the bed of the pickup and set them up at the top of the hill. The land had just enough decline to make sledding worthwhile; for me, it wasn't too steep, and for the boys, it was steep enough for some speed. This was not the smooth path of the sledding hill at Al Quaal Recreation Park in Ishpeming, grated over by the undersides of so many toboggans and inflated tubes, where Jerry, Lars and I had spent our recesses in our years at Birchview Elementary. Beneath the snow in Republic, there waited sharp, primitive chunks of hematite and magnetite, the jugged points of minerals dusted with the red of native ore, or tree branches torn by the vehement



storms of western Marquette County. Though he might try, Dad could never clear all of these obstacles out of our way. We had to look for them as we went—a slight raise of the snow-sheet here and there, a stick poking its gnarled bark up through the icy glaze—and hope we weren't going too fast to stop.

Also around the age of six or seven, there was another place I did my sledding: a place where my dad never left my side. After Christmas and New Year's had passed and January began to slouch down into the treacherous blizzards of February and March, Dad would take me to Al Quaal park, not for the smooth sledding hill in the gully, but to use the toboggan run. We'd go into the lodge first, where on a dark wooden bench we'd slide our thickly-socked feet into snowboots and hide most of our faces beneath balaclavas. We knew how to dress for the cold.

There would be a climb up into a frigid shed, all laced with icicles along its eaves and filled with a smack of cold air. The toboggan sleds were battered but functional, sleek figures of long, fused boards turning up at their noses to tuck over one's feet. Dad got on first. I sat in front of him. There was a yellow cord to hold, the same type of cord that in our backyard held blue tarps tight over piles of wood my father had chopped, the same type of cord that slung lanterns and fishing nets on hooks in our garage. The cord on the toboggan was knotted and frozen and kept me safe on the surface of the sled

if I held onto it: for if I flew off of the sled, terrible things could happen. I could break my arm or leg, or my face could slam down into the ice running alongside us. They would have to close down the run and call an ambulance so people could attend to me in the horrible flash of blue and red lights. Or I could lose a finger in the snag of the sled against the snow, the way timber cutters lost fingers in a saw's giant blade, like Dad showed me at the state fair.

I know that Dad always held on to me on the sled so that these things could never happen. "Hold your arms right in front of you, Annie," he'd say. "People can get their hands lobbed off if they're not smart."

Always, there was a man at the top of the run. I can't remember his face, for he was burrowed deep into winter-wear, much like ourselves. He operated a lever that, at just the right moment, lifted the back of the toboggan to send it speeding down a straight, gleaming track of pure ice. He would count down: "Three. Two. One." A thunk followed, the sled shifting its weight, and at the same time I inhaled, pulling into the tiny pockets of my lungs a cloud of subzero air and feeling little pins of ice stick all over the exposed skin on my face. Happy, I screamed.

The toboggan moved so fast: Dad's hands were on my arms. Three times the size of mine, their nails were rugged and caked with dirt. These were the hands that held tight to an axe and bubbled up volcanic blisters; the

hands that, dry and cracked from winter, gripped ski poles, and then, ski trip over, smoothed back the mottled yellow fur on our dog's head.

At increasing speed we approached Little Lake, at the base of the run. It was frosted over with a layer of ice and snow. I imagined perch and trout moving sludgily through the water in the darkness beneath the ice, the lurch and sway of their sleek bodies. At the edge of the lake, our sled just kept going: the ice on the track ended and we were atop the fluffy snow, drifting over it, and then coming to a stop. The exhilaration of fear still lingered in my now numbing limbs.

“Wah. That was fun, hey?” Dad would say.

When he was a child, his father and mother, Martin and Elaine, must have taken him sledding. They lived in National Mine, southwest of Ishpeming. Dad grew up in a ramshackle house at the top of a winding hill, prime sledding territory. I can see Martin and Elaine at the top of the hill, his arm around her as she stands in her button down dress with a coat draped over her shoulders, watching Dad, their first child, bump down the slope on a hand-carved sled. When Dad reaches the bottom, Martin leaps over mounds of snow and fallen branches to get to him and help him to the top, but he is already standing, already climbing.

On the winter shores of Baby Lake, Dad and I grabbed the yellow cord together, and it was our job to pull the sled back to the top, to the shed where

toboggans lined up against the wall like tilted pillars, encrusted with icy residue from their last ride.

Things were different in Republic. I was with two boys three years my senior and they could watch out for me and teach me how to not make mistakes, how to sled down a hill with glee and never tumble. But I also wanted to show them that I didn't need their help: winter hat tucked over my eyes and with the sluggish movements of limbs padded into a snowsuit, I was often the first to whoosh down the hill.

Time and again it went like this: nothing happened at all, other than a swift, smooth sail to the base of the slope and a long trudge back upwards in snow that piled up to my waist. In the years after we'd gotten our dog, Sugar, she'd play a wicked game in which she jumped into my sled and made me pull her, or, conversely, I'd harness her reindeer-style to the front of my sled and make her pull me. She hadn't the strength, and neither did I, so we'd often just walk up the hill together. My brother and Lars would be up ahead, their adolescent legs carrying much more strength.

But finally, there came a time when it went like this: rushing downhill, the wind snapping back frozen tendrils of my blonde hair, I approached at an unstoppable speed the tangled branches of a pine sapling all covered in snow. The nose of my sled caught onto the tree's slender trunk and the rear of my

sled flipped me up into the sky, a grey sky that was already producing snow showers to the west, lake effect to the east, us in the eye of an Upper Peninsula winter storm likely to get us buried, but the only snow I saw was that on the ground as I fell toward it. I landed on a second sapling, the sibling of the first; my face hit not its branches but the hard pack of snow beside them as a shudder of pine needles scattered onto my coat and I heard Lars saying “Whoa!” as he slid up beside me.

The impact was not what I thought it would be. I felt stiff and mashed; I felt heavy. I didn’t feel hurt. I remember moving my fingers inside of my mittens—how were the tips so cold? Why didn’t my hands ever stay warm?—and my toes inside of my boots, and then lifting myself to my knees.

“Are you okay?” Jerry asked as he joined us.

“Yup,” I said.

I could see my dad appear at the edge of the trees in the distance, picking up a jog, coming towards us. He lunged through the snow in his Sorel boots and arrived at my side.

“I’m fine,” I said. And I was—no bruises, nothing broken, though my face was red and ice-scraped and a branch had torn through my mitten but barely scratched my hand. Still, Dad made a show of helping me up and putting me on my sled so he could pull me back up toward the trailer.

“Can’t just sit there like a bump on a log, eh?” He said.

Inside the trailer, Dad lit the Coleman and used an ancient metal opener to cut into a can of Campbell's Ravioli-Os. He dumped them into a banged-up old saucepan and set it onto the flame. We played cards: five-card draw, crazy eights, black jack. It recalled to mind nights spent at Dad's sister's house in suburban Chicago, the wide glass panes of her patio doors reflecting an image of our family doling out cards to one another, the magic of the deck shuffling through Dad's hands. He often won, then, and in the trailer he often won, too. But sometimes I did, or my brother did.

And Dad would say: "That's how we raised ya."

From deep in the woods, the howls of coyotes lifted up into the air, only just muffled by the snow that had begun to fall. This is how I learned about death: the sound of the coyotes on their nocturnal hunt. Like the struggle of a brook trout in my father's hands after he'd caught it with a hook. Or the chipmunk in our driveway at home with its shredded neck, Sugar sitting beside it and whining like she hadn't meant to kill it. Or the first time I heard a rabbit dying, far off in the woods, and thought it was the sound of a woman screaming.

As we sat in the trailer with Styrofoam, ravioli-filled bowls cupped into our hands, Lars said, "Hey. I think it would be kind of cool to hit a tree on a sled. You went so high up in the air."

"Did I?" I said.

“Yeah. Best jump I’ve ever seen.”

“Good thing she knows the right way to land,” Dad said.

On an afternoon some years after my dad had died, when I was about thirteen years old, Lars and I decided to go sledding. Rather, he arrived at my house with a blue plastic sled and told me we were going.

There is a bluff a block from my childhood home, covered in trees and hosting the city’s water tank at its summit. During the summer, I often walked its red, ore-dusted trails beneath low-hanging branches to sit on a warm rock at the top and look out over the whole city of Ishpeming. In the winter, these trails became a place my dad would take me on the snowmobile, steep as they were, the body of the rumbling, motor-oil-smelling machine tilted far upward as its tracks worked over buildups of snow. But this time, Lars said we were to go sledding there: I couldn’t imagine a sledding hill in the narrow space from tree trunk to tree trunk, but he said we would make one, and so I went.

At the time, I didn’t have any snow pants. I had come to a barren point of my youth. My dad had always been the one to take me out during the winter, cross-country skiing or snowmobiling or shoveling the front yard, and when he died, there seemed no point. I spent my winters inside, clicking around on my computer or reading *The Baby-sitters Club*. Later, I’d get into

the habit of just walking a lot in winter: no matter the snow, I'd be out there. But for a time I had no reason to go outside.

Perhaps Lars sensed that. "Uh, we're going sledding," he said. "Because I'm not going up there alone."

We walked up Empire Street. I admired the people sitting all cozy in their recliners in their homes, looking at magazines amidst the flicker of afternoon talk shows. The winter air flowed in a cool rush over my cheeks.

At the base of the pipe that led up to the water tank, we began to climb. This wasn't the path I most often took to get to the top of the bluff: other trails had a lower incline and were easier to traverse, but this was closer and presented more of a challenge. Lars hooked his lanky arms up onto tree branches and the beams that held the metal pipe in place, and I followed with less agility, less strength, a fear of falling. And then we were at the top.

It had been a long time since I had been up there in winter. Careful not to slip on the ice, I moved up onto a concrete platform at the water tank's base and looked down onto the city streets. "There's my house," I said.

Lars affirmed this by nodding. His house was three houses further down; always had been.

We couldn't find a path to sled on so we decided not to bother with a path and Lars hopped onto his sled and pressed his gloved hands down into the snow on either side of him to get going down the hill to an unknown



destination. The bluff's southern foundations were set on the banks of Partridge Creek, a stream which is now being diverted by the city to lower the mercury contamination of its outflow into Deer Lake. But then, in the winter, it still flowed icy and cool as a drink at the bottom of the bluff's cliffs and I thought if we sledded too far and too fast we might rush right down into the water, and then what? I'd have to pull Lars by the shoulders out of the freezing gush and explain why I thought this was a good idea. But I didn't stop him—I let him go.

It became clear that the place we were sledding had no real treachery. This part of the hill came to a soft stop before it reached a drop-off or any major obstacles; again and again we climbed up and sledded down the hill, and the day sunk into evening and I could see Ishpeming out there looking so cold and solid beneath the creamy lavender twilight with white puffs slipping out of chimneys in a sort of wintry Morse code, dit-dit-dit-dit, space, dit-dit. Through the trees I could see the high school and the hospital; from the top of the bluff I could see the burnt orange and ivory tiers of the mine, where Dad used to work, where men still worked even on the coldest days of winter, and I thought what a sled-ride that would be down into the iron ore pit, the deepest point in Michigan, below the highest point in Michigan, assuming no massive dump truck would run you over, all of the bumps you would hit on your way down to the bottom, a bottom that got deeper and deeper every year that I lived in this town. Now, my slow glide down the side of the bluff

seemed tame; but with my limbs swiftly cooling as day passed into night, I knew I wouldn't go sledding anywhere else that day.

I convinced Lars we should go home. He wanted to sled right down to Eighth Street, but I suggested we not do that. He trailed behind as I tenderly stepped from edge to edge down toward the road. It was getting so dark but the snow had a way of illuminating things so we could see our way, and it made me think darkness never really exists in the winter.

When we got to the bottom of the hill I realized that my fingers and thighs were numb. A frigid sludge of blood pulsed through my limbs and I wished for snow pants; I wished for the winter smarts I had when I was little. We stopped in front of my house.

“Hey, thanks for coming with,” Lars said.

“It was fun.”

There was no one home when I got there and I went straight into the bathroom to peel off my jeans. The skin on my upper legs felt foreign, the same way the skin on your cheek becomes a sheet of rubber after a dentist's shot. I hadn't been sledding in so long—I hadn't spent time outdoors in winter in so long—I was afraid the feeling would never come back into my body. I sat at the edge of the tub and rubbed my cold hands against my cold legs which were becoming a strange shade of red in the dull light of the bathroom bulb. They were cold, but my face was hot as it adjusted to the

indoor temperatures, the heat that busted out of the furnace and up through the radiators into the house all winter long.

I thought maybe I had taken it too far. Maybe this was the year I would get frostbite; all of those years when I was little and I went snowmobiling for hours and I went skiing on trails out in the woods and I whooshed down the toboggan run on a track of pure ice and I sledged up over trees and landed in the snow on my face and I played with Sugar in the backyard, showering snow over her and taking care that the delicate pads of her feet didn't freeze beneath her, all of those years and this would be the year I would get frostbite because I didn't know how to keep warm.

I sat in the bathroom in a panic for a long time until I felt the heat sinking, rooting its way back down into my body, and I knew it was okay.

My mom came home from her evening shift waitressing at the Venice Supper Club. She knocked on the bathroom door. "Andrea? Is that you?"

"I'm fine," I said, even though she hadn't really asked. "Just thawing."

Out in Republic, Dad told us stories. Most of them began with the Yeti that lived in the surrounding woods. He was not a fiery creature, but a mammoth softened by winter's blow. His skin and coat sagged, the color of exposed oyster flesh, loose on his emaciated frame. Dad told us that the Yeti only

wanted to share our dinner. He wanted to sit by our campfire, hair strands tinged by the sparks of emblazoned birch logs.

“I saw him out there in the pit one day,” Dad said, “through the front window of the truck. I told him to put some shoes on—asked him if he was born in a barn. He told me shoes don’t come in Bigfoot size.”

There in Republic, with the thick insulation of winter all around us, its cold sky bleeding snow onto bushes and trees, these stories kept us warm. The cord of each tale as it wound around us kept us safe. When the stories were over, Dad would extinguish the Coleman lamp and all of us would sink into sleep at the same time, moonlight illuminating a floor encrusted with iron dust off Dad’s boots, quilts sewn by his mother now softened and torn by time, and tarnished silverware at the edge of the sink. Through the darkness outside the tiny window by my bunk, I could see the slope of the hill casting down into the stand of trees where my father shot deer in November, readying them to dangle slit open on a hook in our garage at home, their tongues and eyes frozen as the season.

## Runway

With sapphire lights, yellow arrows, and the oval glows of jet windows, about to take off for places thousands of miles and dark oceans away—I lean back and return to the moments I’ve felt vulnerable.

1.

When, as a child, I woke in a tent at night in Wildcat Canyon, the brush-rustle sound of what could be a bear picking through trash outside. Spiders scaled the moonlight that flowed through zipper teeth beside me. I remained still, didn’t breathe—let all sound flit back into the forest.

2.

The day my great-grandmother died, the woman who once cooked me gnocchi with meat sauce. In the casket, her skin was as cotton soft as when life flushed her cheeks. In the cold parlor of the funeral home, my cousins and I played useless games with a deck of cards.

3.

The wood furnace that heated our home in the nineties, for which Dad chopped blocks of birch in the backyard. I stood with the syrup-gleam of orange fire on my face, watching him put his hands toward the smoldering grate to shift ashen logs with an iron stake.

4.

The time I discovered that Mom was a smoker; she'd hidden it from me for a while. But I found a pack of cigarettes while ruffling through her bingo bag. She chastised at me for snooping and left with her friend, and afterwards, Dad came up to my bedroom, sat on the side of my bed, and said, "Your mom will be okay, you know."

5.

But on the day that Dad died, Mom's whole face crumbled at the exact moment she was reaching into the cupboard for a coffee cup. Her own mother took the cup from her hand and told her to sit down. That she would serve the coffee.

6.

Ten years later, when I was twenty, Mom had her heart broken by a man I was never too fond of. When I saw her sitting on a patio chair in the backyard with that cigarette between her fingers, I felt the crush of loss inside her, and I wondered: why do we all fall in love?

7.

At twenty-four, I left a bowl of warm tomato soup on the table, got into my car and sped one hundred miles north when my brother was hospitalized for his seizure disorder. As pine trees heavy with snow whipped by me, I thought: this is it. When I get there, it will be too late. But it wasn't—and as I walked into the room where he reclined on a gurney in a white hospital gown, the first thing he said to me was, "Sorry."

8.

Four months into our relationship, a boyfriend and I took our first cross-country trip together to Rapid City. We spent the whole time looking up into the granite cliffs for bighorn sheep, my dad's favorite animal. On the way home, at dusk, right on the lip of the Badlands, we saw two of them trotting across a wide prairie, their horns in perfect symmetry to one another.

“The things that happen to you,” my boyfriend said, “make me see the world differently.”

9.

Seeing my uncle Paul months before his ninetieth birthday, his body made stagnant by time but his eyes the same beryl blue they were when, as a little girl, I watched him spackle and tile our kitchen walls with a steady hand.

10.

The time in my teens when I was in bed, falling asleep, and a friend from down the road threw a snowball at my window to wake me, and when I went outside to greet him he pointed to the sky where the aurora waved and flickered as an emerald smoke, shielding every star and the nail-tip of the moon.

When the plane takes off, the space between myself and the asphalt widening with air thin as gauze, I hold on just as I did all of those times before.



## Winter Shift

It's still dark, when you leave for the mine in the morning. From behind the front storm door I watch you move through a small pool of light to your Jeep, your aluminum lunchbox a creaking bell in your hand. Sometimes, the clouds have draped open a full moon and I can watch you brush snow from your windshield with your glove, pull chunks of ice away from the wipers, until you climb in and drive away.

Last year, a man that worked in the building next to yours lost his life when he slipped off of an icy iron ore cart and landed on concrete. In bed that night, you told me that it could have been his sleep deprivation from swing shift, or his age, from having worked thirty-nine years at the mine, or the cold, because this was a winter that was hard on the lungs, and when the temperature sinks below zero it seeps in through the walls of the pellet plant and concentrator to stiffen the hands of the people working inside.

I wake up earlier than I need to in the morning, when you're still asleep. By the single light over our kitchen sink, I spoon coffee beans into a grinder and drop the grounds down onto a filter, pour water into the back of the machine. Once you're gone, I fold your thermal underwear and shirts, tucking them into the drawers of your dresser. I walk the house, picking up

books you've left unread and beer glasses you never rinsed. I know you were tired.

When I was young, I toured the mines because my dad worked there. I remember the crusher, the disc filters, and the balling drum, transforming the chunks of ore from the beds of production trucks into tiny pellets. I remember the rotary kiln, firing pellets at 2,400 degrees. There was a window we could look into to see the fiery blast of heat, the orange melt of metal.

Though we were made to wear hard hats and glasses, were told of safety procedures, I knew of a long string of injuries and incidents here, of lacerations and limbs lost. I knew of the sweat-soaked shirts caked in crimson ore dust that my dad had to wash at the laundromat downtown, and of the dented tips of steel-toe boots, the way their leather decayed at the mine.

This is where you work now.

When you are on night shift, I again wake early, waiting for the sound of your Jeep at the end of our street. If there's fresh snow, you'll whip around the corner, because you love to control the uncertainty between rubber and ice, to fly to the edge of the pavement and then back in line again. To the neighbors, this might sound like the impending crack of a windshield or the slam of a steel frame against a streetlight post. But to me, it means you have

survived another night: that you stayed awake and watchful, that the heat in your fingers gave you the grip you needed to operate the gear stick on the loader, shine a flashlight down the length of a conveyor belt, and, before dawn, drive yourself home.

## Ishpeming: A Map

Over a crest on a hill on U.S. 41, the tiers of the mine, the dazzling starlight of a production truck snaking along its side.

The divide of the pavement between bluffs of deciduous trees and Jim's Jubilee, the grocery store where men lick their fingers of the scarlet bleed of jelly donuts at seven a.m., where apples pucker under fluorescent lights and bakers slide commercial saffron buns into plastic sacks.

To the right of the first traffic light, the husks of the Cliffs Shaft Mine, the mouth-like grates across stone, the vertical tunnel where a man once fell to his death, and the patch of grass beside it where teens drink canned Schlitz in the presence of hollow buildings.

City Hall, red-brown stone, the location of the town's first public toilet. Where unionists marched at the dawn of the twentieth century. Where great mounds of snow were dislodged by shovels after the blizzard of 1895, to create a path for the fur coats and top hats and mustaches that passed through.

Buck's Restaurant. Diners with the lingering heat of brandy on their breath, slathering butter on Limppu toast, drawing a coffee cup to their lip.

The Butler Theater, emptied of its seats, its dusty ticket booth, its heavy curtains, emptied of the children who once rode their bikes down Main Street for the matinee, the salt of popcorn through nose and over tongue.

Old Ish. The overseer of a town transforming around him, the collapse of the J.C. Penney building, the rise of Congress pizza parlor with its greased pepperonis and cudighi, banks that opened and closed with money that came and went, train tracks now gone, the people and the horses that once drank from the fountains at the statue's feet now long buried at a highway-side cemetery.

The High School. The Library. The Mather Inn.

Lake Bancroft, turtles and otters, frogs, tadpoles, water bugs, ore-red water.

The Rainbow Bar, where grandfathers drank a beer with John Voelker, where Jimmy Stewart slicked a hand back through his hair, raised an eyebrow, brushed the palm of a man here, a woman there, who would never forget it, who would talk about it from the plush rockers of their living rooms as they ate seasoned potatoes from a dish on a TV tray.

The back road to Negaunee, a decrepit Santa's village, paths up into the hills where fenced-off mine pits lurch with mystery day and night, and where, in autumn, yellowed leaves drift to the ground like the sound of a year gone by.

Deer Lake, mercury in blood coursing through slick trout bodies, and Partridge Creek, diverted with pipes and culverts, cattails, frogs, leaches, white-tailed deer putting snout to mirrored surface.

The bears, the moose, the coyotes, the wolves, the bobcats that wander into town.

The mother moose shot by police. The baby moose, tranquilized.

Miners wrapping fists around dusty lunchbox handles in the pre-dawn syrup of night. Fishing poles, skis racked up in garages. Winter's first snowflakes landing on dead ground, building up through January, through February, through March. Lamp lights in windows, and the flicker of wood-burning basement stoves as they burn through a chopped maple felled in a violent storm.

## Pellets

In November of 1913, a storm system shaped by the dark waters of the North Pacific—rich with the silver flakes of a salmon’s back, the icy seawater of the Alaskan coast—rolled over the Canadian Rockies and fell on a track to the Great Lakes.

Along the lining of Lake Superior, families in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula woke to the news of an oncoming blizzard. Women with candles entered cellars to count jars of blueberry preserves, the numbers of potatoes and turnips in buckets. Their husbands, coming off night shift, emerged into a violet dawn from the black tunnels of copper and iron mines. The men relieving them said, “Snow’s on its way, but the wind will shift. We’ll only see the edges of this one, eh?”

Still, the husbands entered the woods with their rifles to shoot deer. As the cool breath of the impending gale blew into the peninsula’s lungs, hunters hung deer by their rear legs on backyard poles, using knives to pull the fur from their warm carcasses. The men’s children set sight on the thick, clouded sky, the deep grey of the horizon and the white blast of the sinking sun.

The storm hit the water first, pulling up the depths of the lakes with waves that engulfed nineteen ships and took the lives of 273 sailors. In their homes, families watched by the light of kerosene lanterns as a layer of ice



built up over their windows, blocking a dark image of snow fierce as bullets pummeling against the frozen ground. Grandparents from Finland thought of the winter storms of the nineteenth century, cows covered in frost and milk in pails iced over, emaciated foxes found dead at the roots of Scots pines. “*Ei kastunut vettä pelkää,*” they told their grandchildren. *You won’t be afraid of water if you’ve already gotten wet.*

Blizzard-force winds raged for sixteen hours; the winter storm went on for four days. When the skies cleared into a quiet blue, crews in search of the *SS Henry B. Smith* discovered freighter debris on the shores of Laughing Fish Point, broken bottles and lifeboat shreds. The remains of the ship’s second cook were found miles away. Upon hearing the news, dock workers recalled filling the ship with ore a few days prior, crawling into the loading chutes to unclump frozen iron ore pellets with their bare hands. The pellets had loosened from the ice, raining down into the gut of the giant freighter. When the ship left port, the dock workers saw the sailors onboard struggling to close its hatches.

Days later, as the search crew lifted iron pellets from the sand, thinking of the 10,000 tons of ore now lost to the lake, hunters took shovels down from hooks near the back doors of their homes and opened a path through the snow drifted high from the storm. They entered their sheds to check the smoked venison hanging from racks and the deer hides now thick with the weight of the cold. As they rolled lead bullets over in their hands,

they had to wonder whether it would be worth it to risk the blue turn of frostbite on their fingertips to search the woods for whatever partridge or rabbits remained. Maybe it was better not to look toward the sky or consider whether the wind would shift. They lived in a place where the snow always came as hard as an ice pack, where holding the warm gush of a deer heart in their palm meant that one hundred years later their grandchildren would do the same.

John: Cliffs Employment Record (1913)

Date of Birth: April 24, 1880

Age: 33

Place of Birth: Finland

Arr. U.S. 1901

Nationality: Finnish

U.S. Citizen: Yes

Married: Yes

No. of Children: 3

Reads: Yes

Writes: A Little

Speaks Yes, English

*1902.*

Great-Grandfather, you are twenty-two. A trammer at the Negaunee Mine. You shovel ore into a tram car; you push the car to the shaft. Metal to metal, the wheels grind. Your rubber boots press into the dirt. It's dark: you have a

candle, but you can't see. You feel your hands against the rusted edge of the tram car, your feet sliding in boots, dust shaking loose from the rock face above. The damp, the wind, the underground.

At the stope, men look down from beneath candles. Tallow drips, translucent; trails down helmets and faces, down the rock of the stope. Wet eyes, reflections in pupils. You, the tram car: you're at the edge, you look down into nothing. Rat-steps behind you. Chink of hammer on drill bit. Hammer on bone. Explosions, the earth opens more each day, gap by gap, dynamite, cylinders, nitroglycerin, sweat, nitroglycerin sweat, blasts, shatters. The darkness. You inhale: dampness, you exhale: what coils through your lungs.

*1906.*

Great-Grandfather, you are twenty-six. You left Finland five years ago. Kauhava, where your father sharpened knives. Where your mother palmed butter, dust of flour, hands gripped pink udders, cool milk, the lingonberries bursts of red in the forest—deep in the forest, where you ran. Pants rolled up over your calves. You scraped knives against rock, collected coins in a bucket. You saved them. To leave. The tall pines, specters, the nights that stretched across winter. The snow. Lakes long, unending beds of ice.

You are a miner at the Cliffs-Shaft Mine. The Cliffs-Shaft, two timber frames, the A shaft, the B shaft. The dry: you pull on your pants stiff with ore, muck on your skin, a layer, a layer that never comes off. You dip your hands in a basin, in soap, in water, the raw, cracks, blood, iron underbelly, iron underground, on your skin. A layer that never comes off. You eat potato pancakes. Bread pudding. Dumplings. In the backyard on the snow you pull venison raw from bone. Your elbow works the knife. Your hands, layered. The cakes the muck the blood the bones the dust. The metal the organs tissues burgundy black sludge.

You are a miner. You bring down the hammer: to land on ore, a crack. The earth opens. Gap by gap. Dynamite. Cylinders, nitroglycerin, sweat, nitroglycerin sweat, blasts. Shatters. The darkness.

*1910.*

Men have died. You've watched them die. Explosions. Thrown against rock. The bright flare of the dynamite. A light that draws in air, blue, violet, sucks in the room, becomes the room. Rocks that loosen around timber beams and fall, fall on frames. Fragile: marrow calcium cells veins skin skulls. The iron falls to crush hands. Legs. Limbs. One day you are hammering. An explosion. You are on the hard floor of the shaft. You hold the man once next to you. You say, you're not alone.

You're not alone.

Daylight: it's morning and you're in the bedroom with your wife. She stands in front of the mirror in her cotton gown, Josefiina. Hair down her back. Fingers, slim, grip hairbrush handle. She smells of perfume. She whispers, coos at the baby in the crib. You know: your hands are rough. The grime horshoeing in nail beds. They will never be clean. She touches them. Your hands together. The patterns the palms the wrinkles the ridges, yours red and raw from scrubbing, hers clean and smooth though she's been up to her elbows in Borax. You kiss her ear but your mind is already trailing back down the shaft in an iron cage.

*1919.*

Great-Grandfather, you are thirty-nine. Your children: Wilho, Marie, William, Leo, George, Martin, Walter, Johannes, Ruth. And the one that was lost. The one in the grave.

The rest of them tumble in the grass and ride on sleighs and you scoop them up in the kitchen and you scoop them up in the bedrooms and you toss them on your shoulders and they laugh, all of them laugh. You were young once. You scurried through a red barn with cloth folded, pinned, on your waist and your mother plopped you on wooden stools or piles of hay and the

sun fell through cracks in timber beams down onto your faces. The sauna, the dry heat, the cedar fragrance that swiveled into pores, the wooden bucket full of water to ladle out over knees and back. Meat hanging on hooks over sauna rocks. The snow on your feet, your calves, the ice snow sharp sunlight when you stepped outside.

You give these things to your children. You whisper into ears. You tuck hair you tighten shoelaces you wipe dirt with a handkerchief from your back pocket.

Two new headframes at the Cliffs-Shaft. Built around the old ones. Both remain. Reinforced concrete. Safer than wood. Pyramidal. Egyptian style. Dark, but light puzzles in through rectangular window slits. Birds nest in the stone, flutter up toward the point of the ceiling. You step into the cage to be lowered, lowered down into the deepening shaft. Carbide lamp fixed to your helmet. At your assigned level you step out into the tunnel. You watch the mules that have lived underground their whole lives. Eyes adjusted to flame. They eat grain out of a trough in the damp coolness. Their manure hauled back up to surface. You used to watch the young ones prodded into the cage and lowered down into the darkness. And it was you who knew they would never come back, never come back up to the light. The men. The men who never came back. The floods the explosions the falling rock. Hard ore soft ore

damp timber. Bracing, bracing up against a cliff a bluff a mountain. Gravity, what pulls the rock pulls you back down towards the center.

*1920.*

Great-Grandfather, you are forty. You are at the Holmes Mine. Your brass check number, 168. You leave it on a hook. A hook, when you go down. The tunnel of the shaft.

You are forty. You will die. In 1948, you will die. Jackson's Mortuary. The pall bearers. The singers. Your wife. Your children. You travel down the shaft. The darkness at the bottom. The darkness at the top. An absence. Each explosion. Sucks the oxygen. More.

Faces. You see their faces. A blast of light. A mustache. An ear. An eye. A pupil, a center. You travel down. Through the levels.

You walk the streets in town. You shovel snow. New York Mine Salisbury Mine Section 16 Mine, your coworkers your friends your church, train wheels on rails, chunks falling from cars, ice collapsing from eaves. Whistles blowing. Cliffs cottage, iron gates, cigar shops. Josefiina buying flour. Tapping maple syrup in the backyard. Slow wrench of the sap through the branches through the trunk to the tap to the bucket through ice through wood through water.



You want to tell her: slow down. You want to tell her: stop. You want to tell her we only have this, this second minute hour day moment of sunlight moment of open air dawn twilight stars planets earth-spin. Please slow down, you want to tell her. Please stop, your boots your hair your coat the fur wrapping your neck the gloves on your hands the frost in your breath. You are all I have. Stop.

It's cold, your house in the evening. Josefiina's body. You feel it without touch. The warmth beside you. Over her shoulder you watch day open up through the window. A pane of glass that separates. Up north, this brittle winter glow, you wonder what a saltwater beach is like, what Florida is like, Hawaii, the warm parts of the Atlantic, the Pacific, equatorial waters. You close your eyes, imagine a map, follow trails. You reach out to her hip. She's half asleep. She says, sleep now. You're tired.

*1929.*

Great Grandfather, you are forty-nine. You work. Always, you work. This life. It's what was given to you; it's what you made.

Once: a ship landed in Canada. You stepped off. You found work: always, you work. One day, your descendants will say you rode a bike over the bridge to the United States.

But was there a bridge?

Was there a bike?

Your knees were strong. You pedaled. The rubber hit the land. Michigan. Upper Peninsula. Many many years laid out before you. Many years behind. A country behind. You changed everything.

Life landed you here; you fell in love. Married. This was the path. This was the culmination. You went down into the pits. Deep, deep down underground into the mines. You dug, you drilled, you slipped dynamite into rock, you lit fuses, you covered your head with your arms, you ran, ducked, hid, breathed into your elbows with the flash the heat the rumble around you. You paused, stared into darkness, imagined the outline of your boots, your knees, your thighs, your waist, you covered your eyes though you couldn't see. You trembled—sometimes, you shook. You covered your eyes waited for it to be over waited for the next blast.

Your children: they come to you. All fourteen. Born. Their first breaths in the open air. The wakening of the eyes. Brightness. The suck of the air. Some of them so still. Some of them, never to breathe. You remember them in your arms. You remember. The first suck of air. The oxygen. The light. The warmth, the body. Dynamite, cylinders, nitroglycerin, sweat, nitroglycerin sweat, blasts, shatters. The darkness.

For Josefiina

Great-Grandmother: you were born in Isossakyrossa, Finland.

I had to look it up. On a modern map, it's Isokyrö. In eastern Finland, in Ostrobothnia, it is a forty-five minute drive from Kauhava, the knife-making town where your husband was born. It now has a population of 4,831 people. A wide river hushes through the town, bright blue. Thick clumps of trees, glassy water, squares of cultivated fields.

I think you grew up on a farm. You stretched from end to end through the long summer days of Central Finland; in the morning, milking cows, in the evening, serving potatoes out of an iron pot. This, before you moved to America.

According to Isokyrö's website, "The region was considered as being the model for 'Pohjola' (the North) which is mentioned in 'Kalevala' the Finnish national epic." I've read the *Kalevala*. There is a verse that has always stood out to me:

Her times grew weary and her life felt strange  
from being always alone  
in the air's long yards, in the empty wastes.

So now she steps further down, launches herself upon the waves  
on the clear high seas, upon the open expanse  
The ages go on, the years beyond that  
as the new moon gleams.

Somewhere between 1900 and 1906, your passenger ship landed in  
North America, and you stepped out, boot on the ground, heel in the soil.  
Your hair braided tight against your head. Your steamer trunk, black with  
brass hardware, carrying all of your belongings, your cotton dresses, your  
hairbrush, your comb, loaded onto a cart. You said goodbye to Finland. You  
never went back.

Here, in Upper Michigan, you baked rye loaves and folded pasties  
while John worked in the mines. You gave birth, Great-Grandmother, to  
fourteen children. You were pregnant almost every year, from 1907 to 1924.  
You lost some children, including your last one, a baby boy. I have thought  
about this. I have thought about fertility, about loss, about how you felt,  
about myself. About the lushness of all of the life in the ones who survived,  
about the emptiness, the absence of the ones that did not. I have thought  
about those spaces: the spaces where my aunts and uncles might have been.  
The children you had that I never met because they died before I was born.  
How I never met you.

In Isokyrö, there's a historic stone church, built in 1304.

You had to have known this church, Great-Grandmother. You had to have gone inside. The door is so low. The windows, so large. The pine trees, the thatched roof, the gravestones, a swatch of lawn. Inside, within the darkness, carvings of saints. Faded paint, pink and yellow against white, illustrating the walls. This is hallowed ground. In photos, I can sense the quiet. The long wooden benches, the elaborate script adorning the window frame. I see the people that set the stones, that painted the walls, that carved the benches out of forest timber, that so carefully shaped the letters to form the words.

I see you in town. You walk past the church. Through the farmlands. The winters whip with snow, ice, wind, but the summers are ripe and green, and like me you take in the sun when you can. You lift your face to the warmth with your eyes closed.

I know your birth year, your marriage year, your death year. I have two photographs of you. You look stern, smile-less; strong. Your hair coiled tight, your hands firmly together, you are ready. For something.

I'm told my mouth looks like yours. I wonder if it sounds the same when I speak, even in a different language. I examine your wedding dress.

The curve of your jaw. The shape of your arms, sleeved. The shoes that you wore.

Great-Grandmother, when I was born, you were dead, but my mother's grandparents were still alive. At their house in Iron Mountain, they sat me in a high chair and fed me gnocchi with meat sauce. They fed me soft chunks of garlic bread. They were old, their skin sheet-like, their faces gray. They died a month apart, when I was nine. Great-Grandmother, they taught me about age. About death. But so did you.

Your son was my grandfather. Your grandson, my dad. He's the one that took me to ore boats and state fairs and fishing creeks and lifted me up because I was small; he's the one that drove me through Wisconsin and Minnesota and South Dakota and Wyoming and Montana, down to Florida through the Virginias and the Carolinas and Georgia. He turned the wheel, he pumped the gas, he took me all over the country. A few days before he died, we ate crescent rolls at the kitchen table while Motown played in the background. I owe it to you, Great-Grandmother. I owe it to you.

Martin, You Were

Four fingers and a thumb, seared from the steam of an exhaust pipe,  
wrapped around a Cleveland Cliffs coffee cup.

A wrinkled hand setting a saucepan—butter sizzling inside—on the burner of  
a gas range.

Fingernails picking into the skin of an orange and peeling, around and  
around, a strip with a beginning and an end. The inside segments of the  
orange landing on a plate.

Boney, denim-draped legs sticking out from under a Formica table.

Two sharp knees; a fork with vanilla cake.

A flannelled arm casting a line on the Fence River. A pair of feet, booted and  
sunk firm into cat-tailed soil.

A carved face with two sharp eyes. A Komatsu cap lifted away from a head.

Hips stretched the length of eighty years covered in rubber waders, clipped to a belt around a waist that shrunk with age.

Arms that reach down to blueberry bushes; violet juice smeared over fingers.

Ears; the sounds of owls fluffing feathers in pine branches, of deer hooves marking their prints road-side in the woods.

A figure in the passenger seat of a truck while a son drove. One arm out the window. Watching the road unfold.

A shape bent over a table at Thanksgiving dinner, a trembling hand mashing potatoes with a fork.

A six-foot, slender silhouette under a sheet on a hospital bed. A blue vein with an intravenous needle. A window open to a cool lake breeze, gentle on the skin, woven through the lungs.



Mom said, I made you bright again. Mom said, I helped you cope. Because life fades. Do you remember how you put me on your knee? Do you remember your house, the kitchen table, the coloring books, the yellow cupboards, how you took your hat off and put it on my head?

After Elaine died, you were so sad, so dark, so alone, you left the electric space heater on, at the end of the bed at your feet, while you slept, and your son came over and unplugged it and told you to get up, to get out of bed, and Grandpa, I understand you and I know how warm it must have been. The heat: you'd never want to move.

Your dialysis. Your machines, your tubes, your veins. Your kidney failure. Do you remember calling my name when you were dying? Do you remember saying, "Annie? Where's Annie?"

I was in the hallway, Grandpa, and I heard you calling my name. But I can't remember if I ever responded.

## Elaine

I never met you. You died a month before I was born. Grandpa Martin believed I brought a part of you back with me when I came into the world. It's why he always kept me so close. He always held my hand; he fed me cake. He buckled me into my car seat in his Dodge truck.

Grandma, even though I never met you, I remember you. You used to cook in a summer kitchen. You rinsed root vegetables in a bowl, your hair in curls cut close to your face and the fierce angles of your cheekbones. A relative told me that you continued to scrub laundry in a basin outside, well after the invention of the washing machine. My dad and uncle and aunts also had to bathe in a tub in the summer kitchen for lack of running water. You all used an outhouse. You were an outdoor family, a hardworking family. Your hands, they must have bled from scrapes on bark and branches. Cracked from wringing shirts along the rails of the washboard in hot water. But softened when you shaped dough into prune tarts like your mother once made. Brandy in the filling.

A childhood friend of my dad's told me that you were the sweetest, most caring and genuine woman he ever knew. You were like a mother to him. You took in the neighborhood kids. You gave them *pannu kakku* and *joulutorttu*. Having grown up on a farm, you knew how to gather and clean and churn and

bake. Your hands knew feathers, eggs, udders, skin, bones. Cream, butter, berries. You knew the climb from the root cellar to the surface, from the kitchen to the bedrooms to smooth sheets over iron-framed beds. You knew the walk from the back door to the barn, winter, with boots on.

I once read an article that said women often turn out to look like their paternal grandmothers. I see it, and I don't. We share some features but I think you may have been a stronger woman than me. My mom told me about your stomach cancer diagnosis. You were stoic about it. You seemed okay. You didn't go to the hospital for a long time. You didn't want anyone in the family to worry. I don't remember if this is how my mom told me the story but I imagine you revealing the diagnosis to the family while sitting on the couch, back straight, drinking coffee. Like there's no matter to it; like this is how it was supposed to be. I know a lot of other people were devastated. You kept it together. I don't know that I could do that, Grandma.

You are like a gap in the constellation of my history. I know what the image is supposed to be, but a point of connection is missing. An empty space. I've had dreams about you where you speak to me like I am one of your own. I can't hear the words you say; your mouth simply moves, always cheerful. It is like we were supposed to meet, but something misaligned. Something derailed. Or maybe it's true that our souls brushed on my way in, or maybe

it's just DNA. There is an affinity between us that I haven't figured out. I'm always searching for you.

My Dad stayed with you until the day you died. He would sleep in a bed next to yours in your hospital room. I know, Grandma, that you were probably in a lot of pain. I know that he was, too. But he was with you.

Now, you are both gone.

## Paul

You were the youngest, the baby, the one I thought I would always see around town. And then you were gone.

Your neighbors called you “Pauly.” It made me think of you riding your bike down Jasper Street, that slope past the Cliffs Cottage on a bend towards Division, past the high school, the laundromat, a chain-link of bars.

When I was little, you came to our house and painted our kitchen sky blue. Before that, it was mint green. I remember you on a stepladder by the coffee corner, perched up next to the cabinet full of mugs and spices. Your arm moving up and down, the rhythm of the paint brush, the colors changing. You wore a white shirt, jeans, suspenders. To me, you were a painter, had always been a painter.

Dad used to take me to your apartment above the Snyder Drugstore and Hallmark downtown. It felt special to open the door right next to the store and walk upstairs. The living room was small, the carpet splayed out in seventies shades, the furniture brown. We all sat on the sofa and chairs and your wife, Audrey, my great aunt, hauled in a tray of soda and coffee and cookies. My dad talked to you about fishing spots, those deep tangles of the woods where you both trekked in flannel and rubber waders, no mind to the mosquitos clinging needle-nosed to your arms, right through the shirt.

I was still little when you were diagnosed with a brain tumor the size of an orange. You had a surgery to remove it, and you survived. I didn't know a lot about survival back then. I imagined you on the operating table, your skin pulled back and your skull sawn open, what it would take to remove a vile infestation like that. How did you make it through? How was that possible?

Afterwards, you were no longer permitted to drive. I would see you on your bike on the downtown streets, and I admired you because you were one of those people who never left town, and never felt bad about it.

We, us Ishpeming kids, aren't like that anymore. If we don't move away, we're made to feel guilty. If we stick around, no one will see us on our bike and smile. They'll think, she never made it.

As a teenager I worked at Joseph's SuperValu and you biked there from your apartment, still over the Snyder Drug. My dad had been dead for years at that point and you always told me I looked like him. I knew you were becoming forgetful, Uncle Paul, but there was enough left for that to mean something to me. To mean a whole lot. I remember bagging up the white bread and the bananas and ground beef and wishing I knew you.

Still, I can't believe I never became closer to you, my uncle who rode his bike or walked around town for so many years, who always asked me if I

was engaged to that Irish guy yet. No, Uncle, that never happened for me. But I'm okay with continuing to answer the question.

Before you were gone, I was already thinking I would regret a lot of things. Not having visited you at the Senior High Rise, the one by the giant egg-beater windmill. Not showing up for your 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party, because being around so many of the elderly people on that side of the family reminded me of my dad, of loss, of ageing, of saying goodbye to everyone that ever knew him, eventually. Not going to visit you when I worried you were sad and lonely and ill, which to me sounded like the bitter end. Even then, I kept on living my life.

You were the last of fourteen children, the end of one path, the start of a fork in the road. Sometimes we ignore the key to our existence.

I was in Los Angeles when I found out you had died. I thought of my dad; I always think of my dad. Then I thought of you at Aunt Esther's funeral, perhaps the last time I ever saw you, sitting on a bench near all of the coats on hangers.

"Oh, Andrea!" You said when you saw me.

The exact sound of your voice, I can still hear it. The clothes you wore, the pale blue shirt and the white tennis shoes. I wish I would have known

you more, but I'm sure we both knew that this is how things often turn out,  
this is how things are often meant to be.



## Esther

You were purple. You were blue.

Dad and Jerry and I spent so many afternoons in your kitchen, late summer, white tile with tiny flowers, a fridge covered with paper and magnets, an oven, always hot. Something sweet in a saucepan on the stove, wooden spoon turning. We delivered you blueberries picked from the creeks of Wildcat Canyon, from patches beneath pines in West Ishpeming. You baked us pies.

Your kitchen table, a plate, the flake of the crust, the clump and ooze of the dark, violet berries loaded with sugary syrup. The metal of the fork clinking down on ceramic. You wore a house dress. They were the fabrics of my youth: ivory, soft, always with some delicate pattern in daisies or bluebells or roses. My mom wore them, my grandma wore them, my aunts wore them.

You never wore slippers, and from my seat at the table I stared at your feet. You had bunions, knobs like hardware beside your big toes, the only ones I had ever seen, and I wondered about them, but I never asked; or at least, never asked you. I may have said something to my dad about them later.

You were purple. You were blue. I learned about how as you get older, veins pull toward the top of your skin, paths appear, you become more aware of the blood that pumps, of feelings both painful and pleasant. I'm twenty-nine now, Esther, and I want you to know that I have started to have them, too. I used to stare at your legs at the bottom of the house dress, the skin, the tapestry, I may have felt uncomfortable then but now I want it to have been beautiful.

Now, I think it was beautiful.

I remember: you were tough around the edges. You told me to behave. If I spilled, you made me clean it up, right then and there. If your granddaughter was over and we were jumping on the bed in the attic and being too loud, you hollered for us to quiet down, and you meant it. We laughed and collapsed on the bed and in silence stared up at the wooden beams. Surrounded by boxes, dusty lamps, photo albums, stuffed animals, wool coats on hangers, folded quilts, we smiled in silence. It was cool up there, and your house felt safe.

When my grandmother on my mom's side died, you were at the funeral, but you weren't quite sure where you were. You thought it was your sister-in-law's funeral: my other grandmother, Elaine. The grandmother I never met. So you told me about her. I was happy to listen.

In the basement of Bethel Lutheran, after the funeral, while we all ate apple pie and raspberry crumble and oatmeal cookies, taco salad and mostaccioli and a rainbow of vegetables on a plastic tray—near a bright red bowl of fruit punch with chunks of ice afloat—you asked me how I was doing, and then told my brother and me, “Have a nice life.”

I think about that a lot now, because it’s true I never saw you again, and you would never have any idea how my life would unfold.

My brother bakes a lot now. He makes pumpkin bars, rhubarb pies, cookies with chocolate chunks. Every time we have a family gathering, he’s made dessert. He puts care into it, Esther. He takes pictures. The food always tastes good.

I wonder if a lot of that is because of you.

I remember: Dad would open the door and we’d step into your kitchen and the whole house would smell thick and wonderful with the utter fragrance of what you’d made: berries flour sugar raw eggs vanilla the powders the sodas the hands pressed on the table the rolling pin pressed on the table the dough lining the fingernail beds the flour falling to your legs and your feet. The scents that travel along a lifeline, that continue even after you are gone.

## For Dad

I've spent twenty-four hours, I've spent twenty years, thinking of your last moments.

Of you standing beneath the arch in our dining room, hand on chest, arm muscles tendons and veins, blood, machinery, the nerves that create motion, a stripe of bone flush with marrow, the deer hides your hand hung from hooks in our garage. I always had to cover my nose from the smell but when I stepped back out into the backyard snow I still sensed it, even when I filled myself with cold air.

I read your autopsy report. I told my boyfriend I was doing it and he said why, why would you do that? Why would you do that to yourself? But I kept reading and it told me about every part of you, and you should know that it said every part of you was perfect, every part as expected and normal, until the examiner's instruments landed on the thin tissue of your aorta and found the hole.

It seems that hole had been there for years. It seems that tear had been widening a bit more each day, a thin trickle of blood escaping, until it was enough, enough of a loss to destroy the vital function of your body.

I should tell you that now I see it when I remember you pulling me across our backyard on the plastic sled or you lifting me to pluck apples from the tree or you chopping firewood in the backyard with everything roped up in the rich smell of the bark the moss soil worms beetles metal falling through the rings of the dead tree. I see the leak. The failure. I call it that, but Dad, I don't know. Maybe that's how it was always meant to be.

Materials, matter, diagrams. Cranial cavity dorsal body cavity vertebral cavity abdominal cavity. Cartilage bones joints passages lymph nodes spinal cord skeleton glands vessels heart. Pathology reports caskets burial grounds, the earth. Death as physical, I go to the cemetery to put my hand on the gravestone and wonder what remains. I trace, on my own hand, the blue veins that lead to my knuckles, the creases, the furrows in the skin. I scrape off cells.

I look at pictures of you. No heat remains in that body. Flesh gone cold. I bring you back to life and travel you down the circuits of my memory. I

reignite your parts, I make them move. You lift me up you set me down you  
ask my mom to marry you, you ice fish, you fly on a helicopter in Vietnam  
and you feel your body unsettle with the chop of the blades, you're on the  
porch with your parents, your dad pulls you in a red wagon, you've never  
been born.

You've never been born.

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