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Come with Me to Taco Tuesday: Essays and Appeals

Richard Hackler
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COME WITH ME TO TACO TUESDAY: ESSAYS AND APPEALS

By

Richard Hackler

THESIS

Submitted to
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Title of Thesis: Come With Me to Taco Tuesday: Essays and Appeals

This thesis by Richard Hackler is recommended for approval
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ABSTRACT

COME WITH ME TO TACO TUESDAY: ESSAYS AND APPEALS

By

Richard Hackler

Come with Me to Taco Tuesday is a collection of short creative nonfiction that (loosely) charts the past eight years of my life living near Lake Superior. The essays vary in style, structure, and tone, and, when read together, chart my development from adolescence (small concerns, exuberance) to adulthood (larger concerns, a more restrained exuberance). The collection should also be read as a love letter to the Lake Superior Region's landscape and people.

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2012

To my sister.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you: Paul Lehmberg and Dan Gocella, for reading and caring and identifying my many instances of bullshit. Matt Frank, for pushing me out of my head. Ron Johnson, for guidance and kindness. Laura Mead, for inspiration and company. Cynthia Brandon Slocum, for teaching me what creative nonfiction is. All of the kind, funny, strange, smart people I've met while living here. My family, without whom I would be nothing. Everyone who appears in my essays; I hope I didn't slander you. And you, idle peruser of NMU's thesis-database: thank you.

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COME WITH ME TO TACO TUESDAY: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: So what is your thesis all about?

Come with Me to Taco Tuesday: Essays and Appeals is a collection of personal essays that charts my development from adolescence into the confusing world of semi-adulthood. The essays are obsessed with the Lake Superior region—all but one are set here—and rely heavily on a rapid accumulation imagery and sensual detail. I do this both to try to instill in my reader the same affection I feel for the region—I've lived on Lake Superior for ten years, and really can't imagine myself anywhere else—and to keep my writing from growing too self-involved and sappy. Since my essays are usually about loneliness and the struggle towards some sort of meaningful intimacy, the temptation to grow sappy is always present. (It is easier to be sappy when addressing such problems; it is easier to offer easy answers and get out. Loneliness is such an ugly topic, and who wants to linger?)

In fact, many of these essays follow a pattern like this: a) I (the narrator) am sad about something. B) I am struggling with this sadness. C) I go for a walk or drive somewhere in my car to try to forget my sadness. D) I realize that I live in a beautiful place and am surrounded by wonderful people, and that my

sadness is (thus) stupid. And then there's a rhapsodic conclusion that attempts to convince my reader that, hey, life isn't so bad.

Q: Why is the word "appeals" in your title?

Because I rely heavily on direct-address in my essays. I love how an essay can turn, or become more intense and intimate, when a writer begins speaking to his reader. It seems to me the difference between lecturing to many people in an auditorium, and speaking quietly into someone's ear. The idea of lecturing bores me so much—especially when I'm writing an essay! It feels like lecturing to an empty auditorium—but I enjoy speaking into peoples' ears.

When I'm writing like this, I'm usually attempting to convince my reader of something. Most of my essays evolve into arguments by the end. And, usually, the argument goes something like: life is frequently ugly, but we can make something better of it, you and me. We will stand near one another, and examine our surroundings until we find something beautiful, and we will find meaning in that beauty, and it will be exhausting and difficult work, but we can do it, we will draw from each other's strength, and anyway what's our other option? Finding a bridge to jump from? We can do this. We need to do this.

Q: Whose ears are you speaking into?

A few of the essays in this collection are written to a good friend. She's sitting near me now, writing her own thesis introduction. We are eating pizza and

drinking beer. We sometimes face unpleasant things (like writing thesis introductions) together, and in this way make our lives more hospitable. "Come with Me to Taco Tuesday" and "The Beginning Guitarist's Guide to Seduction" are written to her.

There are other examples of this. I wrote "The Ballad of Roy Buck" because I wanted to show my friend, Roy Buck, that he's influenced me. I wrote "It's a Lonely World" as a hymn of gratitude to my friends Cynthia and Ted. And so on.

I can't write for the sake of writing. I've never kept a journal. You can't imagine how boring I find my own thoughts. I can only write to reach people, to commune with people I know and love, and in this way to feel less alone. I'm very inarticulate in my real life; I don't find it easy to talk about the things I think and feel. I'm better at writing it out. So here are these essays.

Q: Does this work to make you feel less alone?

Sometimes.

Q: Who are some writers that have inspired your writing?

I've mentioned my love of the Lake Superior region. This is where my thesis is set. Not only because I live here, but because I draw my inspiration from the beauty and strangeness of the area.

It didn't even occur to me that I could write about the area until I read Barton Sutter. His essay collection, *Cold Comfort*, is a celebration of Duluth's people and landscape. It was genuinely thrilling to come across this book when I lived there, because it never occurred to me that my immediate surroundings might be worth writing about. Here's how he describes a walk along Tischer Creek. Which ran just two blocks from my house!

I leave the main trail and follow a rocky path right beside the creek until the ravine becomes a canyon with walls a hundred feet high. I'm lost in shadows now but come around a bend and there's a surprise—a footbridge with railings, arching over the stream, as if it had grown right out of the rock. Further downstream there's another, and another: three bridges altogether, like reflections of each other. When I cross the last bridge I'm standing on the canyon floor. I know I'm in Duluth, but I feel I'm somewhere else—Montana or Japan. The floor of the canyon is an alluvial fan of fine brown sand. I rest in the shade of a grand old willow while the creek curves away and flashes in the sun before it disappears in a tangle of bush. (40-41)

You didn't need to live somewhere glamorous to be a writer. You didn't need to live in Paris. Duluth was plenty beautiful, and here was proof. This realization not only inspired me to write, but to better appreciate the area. I grew more connected with the land. I became an explorer of creeks.

Stylistically, I'm deeply indebted to Annie Dillard and Dave Eggers. I love Dillard's intensity and zeal. Her commitment to wild, far-flung metaphors. The impression I get when reading her work that a very intelligent and somewhat unhinged woman is whispering urgent things to me in a tightly enclosed space. Her eyes are wide and do not blink. It's clear she hasn't combed her hair in weeks.

She achieves this effect, I think, because she writes about big, big things—how to live in a brave and adventurous way, or how to remain spiritually active in a world full of evil. Things like this. But she conveys these ideas using the material available to her. And, most often, this material consists of whatever she finds while walking through the woods behind her suburban backyard.

Her life is not a large or a vivid one, but she makes it seem so with the intensity of her vision. She hammers away at her images until they say what she wants them to. She explains this method in her craft essay, "To Fashion a Text":

... nonfiction accounts may be literary insofar as the parts of their structures cohere internally, insofar as the things are in them for the

sake of the work itself, and insofar as the work itself exists in the service of an idea...

Nonfiction accounts don't ordinarily meet these criteria, but they may. Walden Pond is the linchpin of a metaphysic. In repeated and self-conscious rewritings Thoreau hammered at its unremarkable and rather dreary acres until they fastened eternity in time and stood for the notion that the physical world itself expresses a metaphysical one. He picked up that pond and ran with it. He could just as readily have used something else - a friend, say, or a chestnut. You can do quite a bit with language. (293-94)

I've tried to run with this idea in my own writing. My acres, like Thoreau's, are pretty unremarkable! I've lived in the upper Midwest my whole life. I've traveled only a very little. I've never climbed a mountain or fired gun.

And so I've worked to draw large meanings from my mundane life. There are two essays in this collection whose entire narrative comprises a walk across town. There's another whose narrative is driven by a bikeride. Sometimes I'll drive a car, and that's about as heated as the action gets. And my goal is to divine large meanings from the things I find while walking or biking. In "Happy Homegrown," I'm walking across downtown Duluth and encounter a

pothole. I linger over this pothole, and describe it lovingly, and I think about it, and attempt—through sheer force of will!—to turn it into a symbol: of Duluth’s decayed beauty, of my fleeting youth. These are the sorts of things I try to do in my essays. My life is outwardly unremarkable, but maybe I can hammer away at it until it acquires some larger coherence. I owe this idea to Annie Dillard.

I’ve taken from Dave Eggers a commitment to energy and voice. I don’t know of another writer who writes with his exhilaration. This is the opening of “After I was Thrown in the River and Before I Drowned,” a short-story he wrote from the perspective of a dog:

Oh I’m a fast dog. I’m fast- fast. It’s true and I love being fast I admit it I love it. You know fast dogs. Dogs that just run by and you say, Damn! That’s a fast dog! Well that’s me. A fast dog. I’m a fast- fast dog. *Hooooooooo! Hooooooooooooooooo!*

You should watch me sometime. Just watch how fast I go when I’m going my fastest, when I’ve really got to move for something, when I’m really on my way—man do I get going sometimes, weaving like a missile, weaving like a missile between trees and around bushes and then *pop!* I can go over a fence or a baby or a rock or anything because I’m a fast- fast dog and I can jump like a fucking gazelle. *Hooooooooo! Man, oh man.*

I love it I love it. I run to feel the cool air cool through my fur. I run to feel the cold water come from my eyes. I run to feel my jaw slacken and my tongue come loose and flap from the side of my mouth and I go and go and go my name is Steven (205).

I love this technique. The breathlessness of the sentence structure. The leaps he takes from idea to idea and image to image. Sometimes, when I'm trying to ratchet up the intensity in my own writing, I'll employ a similar technique to try to draw my readers in. Long, winding sentences and a blur of images and ideas. When I'm riding my bike in "Here is Marquette," say, or driving my car in "Houghton Escape!".

Q: You are supposed to, I think, talk about where your work fits in within the modern literary landscape. Can you address that?

I love Ander Monson's writing. His essays are obsessed with the Upper Midwest—with darkness and cold, with trying to stay sane during six month winters—and I think some of the things I write might fit next to him. Though my writing is less research-heavy, more confessional.

And there is Dave Eggers, whom I've mentioned. Like him, I tell jokes to keep my writing from becoming maudlin. And I've talked about how we both favor long, long sentences.

And, I think, I fit in with other essayists who rely on voice and imagery and figurative language to try to convey some sense of hope. Amy Leach's "You Be the Moon," a fact-piece about the moon written in a lyrical, childlike voice, is a steady source of inspiration. As is Michael Madonick's "The Box," a personal essay about memory written in an urgent, trance-like voice. (I wish he had a book of essays, but he doesn't.)

But there are some trends that I resist. I don't like many of the segmented essays getting published today. I don't like essays that mar a good personal narrative by introducing jarringly unrelated facts or research (and there are so many of these out there: the essay begins, say, as a narrative of the author's adolescence. But then there's a break and suddenly the author is listing facts about narwhals, or something. And we're to make the connections; we're to figure out how narwhals and the author's troubled adolescence are related).

I hope that I don't sound like a philistine when I complain about this. I know it's all the rage. And some people do this very well: Annie Dillard, clearly, does this very well. But I think she's an exception (and I think she takes pains to ensure that the lines she's drawing will be visible to readers not privy to everything that's in her head). Usually, when I read one of these essays, I'll admire the depth of research and the connections the author attempts to make between the personal and the academic. "What an interesting mind this person

has," I'll think. "I admire how she weaves these facts about narwhals with the narrative of her father's alcoholism." And maybe some new synapses will fire in my brain, and I will begin considering my own adolescence as an Arctic winter, and I was like a narwhal when I was fourteen, hunting for flatfish beneath the smothering pack ice of suburban Minneapolis. And, okay, that's interesting. But it doesn't make me feel anything (except a vague depression, and the sense that I'm missing something, that I should read it again, probably, but I don't want to read it again). It doesn't change me. I want essays to change me.

Q: Is there anything else we should know about your thesis?

Truthfully, I'm not much of an academic, and I feel silly writing about where I fit within the Modern Literary Landscape. Both because my essays are not as good as Amy Leach's, and because I have no idea what the Modern Literary Landscape looks like. I read things that I like and avoid things I don't like and really have no idea what any of it adds up to.

Sometimes, when I'm feeling good about my writing, I think of my essays as pop-songs. If you put a gun to my head and said, hey, you have a choice: either every copy of the collected works of William Shakespeare is going to be destroyed, or the entire recorded output of British pop band The Kinks, I wouldn't hesitate. I'd burn the Shakespeare. Because—and I don't know if it's like this for you, but bear with me—I find it much easier to be cynical. This is my

real, resting worldview, what I revert to when I'm not trying: life is short and ugly; the people you love will leave, or die. And soon. You are all alone, and nothing you do matters even a little.

But when I listen to the Kinks—let's say I'm listening to "Afternoon Tea," maybe my favorite song of theirs—I don't feel this way. Something about the melody, and the aching in the vocals, and the sighing lead guitar—and I don't know how to write about this without turning vague and new-agey, it's true—but something about this song makes me feel better. Not that it changes my conception of life and the world around me; but it fills me with a restless, gnawing yearning, and the desire to make something good of my surroundings. To find beauty and coherence where I can, even if only in small moments; to invest myself in the people around me, even though they won't be around forever. If they leave, I'll find new people. This is what the song "Afternoon Tea" by The Kinks helps me think and feel. It's like a booster shot that helps me maintain a grown-up worldview.

And, to the extent that I care whether my essays mean anything to the people I'm not directly addressing, this is what I'd like my essays to say. I'd like my readers to read me describe the scales of the salmon at Thill's Fish House, or the young woman who works at the Subway in Wawa, Ontario, and then to think, hey, maybe my life is full of small, good things too. And then to live a

better day because of it. To feel more prepared to face and fight off whatever darkness is threatening to overwhelm his or her life.

Anyway. Here's my best effort towards that.

ONE

COME WITH ME TO TACO TUESDAY

Listen: I know you work tomorrow. I work tomorrow, too. But come anyway. I'll drive, we'll have a couple of drinks, and we'll both be in bed by eleven.

Listen: I know the taco-meat at Harley's is soaking in grease, is gray and mealy and will make you sick, but that isn't the point, it isn't. We'll make salads of the condiments, we'll split a tub of popcorn, and we'll be fine.

Keri will be working the bar tonight, friend. Keri, who will lower her head when she listens to us order, her blond hair falling across her face like party streamers. Keri, who will look up when we're finished speaking, reposition her glasses with an extended index finger, and size us up with eyes sharp as flint; Keri, whose close-lipped smile and clinical gaze will leave us feeling exposed beneath florescent lighting, make us shove our hands in our pockets, lower our eyes, rock backward on our heels. But we get along, Keri and I, because I come in here so often, because she is an art major and we once talked about it, because she knows that I am not just some townie-schlub who comes in on Tuesdays to stare at her across the bar with moony eyes. And because of this, because Keri has trained on me her superior powers of perception and found me friendly-enough and vaguely conversant on the subject of photography, she will make my gins and tonic strong, and give me three for the price of two.

So sit next to me, friend, slide your stool up by mine, bask in the light cast by my charisma, and you, too, could end up with a free gin and tonic.

And I know that it's superficial, that the friendliness of a working bartender is fleeting, and I know that the smallness of this town requires that we be nice to one another, but I don't care, and I will take my fellowship where I find it.

Listen: I don't know how it is for you, but I feel as though I should know more by now. The people around me still seem so unreachable, as I'm viewing them from behind a sheet of glass. That girl, say, I used to see every morning, sitting across the aisle from me on my bus to work. I would sit down and she would already be there, resting her head against the seat, a tuft of strawlike hair spraying from the rim of her knit-cap and tucked neatly behind her ear. She would sigh, sometimes, fidget in her seat as the bus lurched forward, and shut her eyes against some hardship. And I would sigh, too, smiling at her as I sat down, looking down at my shoes, raising my head to glance over at her again, wishing that I could capture the way the tepid winter light would leak through the window and settle on her face, wishing that I were Manet or someone, and I would sit there and wonder— who is this girl? What does she think about? How does she spend her weekday evenings, what sort of music does she like, does she hold strong political convictions and do they align with mine? These are the

things I would wonder. And I wanted to lean across the aisle and ask her, I wanted to bridge the gulf—this impossible, aislewide gulf— that separated us, but I never learned how. I never found the words.

And if she looked over and caught me wondering, I would widen my eyes, always, raise my head and smile at her in a knowing way, a way that said, hey, you and me: we are riding a bus together! and quickly lower my head to consider my shoes.

But I am so, so tired of looking at my shoes.

Listen: I don't know you well, and if you come with me tonight we will probably begin uncomfortably. I know this. After we order, we will carry our drinks across the room, you and me, we will sit at a table beneath a television playing a hockey game, and we will fidget in our stools, not knowing how to begin. But come anyway, because we can, we can work our way through the pleasantries, the small-talk, the bad jokes and aborted stories and silences that fall suddenly and linger like a smell. We can sleepwalk through all of this and wake up in a few hours, maybe, wake up, look around, and find that somehow we have come to know each other, and look at where we've arrived, at how much brighter and more vibrant the world seems now that we're viewing it together.

Such things happen, you know. It could happen to us.

Mike Waite will be singing and playing his guitar tonight. In the back-corner, by the popcorn machine, standing beneath a turned-off television bolted to the wall. Mike Waite: tall and thin, who might shatter if you dropped him, whose black hair rises stiffly from his head like a little shrub. Mike Waite, who will blink and beam at us as he plays guitar, who will take requests that we write on post-it notes and deliver to him between songs, who will sing us anything, anything in his cooing voice—a voice that sounds as though it should be coming from some sort of bird—even the theme-song of the television show *Cheers*, if only we ask it of him.

Come with me to Taco Tuesday because I am sick of always exercising this much caution, sick of stepping back, of weighing and calculating and considering the repercussions of each of my actions. I am sick of lowering my voice when I sing in the shower, sick of not getting a running start and seeing how far I can slide down the icy sidewalk because what will that man driving that Honda Civic think as he passes me. And, although I know it's a small thing, tonight feels like a stand, anyway—a handful of chaos (going out! On a Tuesday!) that we can sow into our week to remind us that we are alive, that our fates have not yet hardened, that we still have some say in what happens to us.

Come with me tonight and I will finish my second drink, look happily across the table at your face, and regale you with all of my best material. I will tip

back in my stool and tell you that I have been unable to chew gum since the winter of 2004, when a seven-year old girl named Nicole Sandberg punched me in the face. I will reveal to you to you that I can juggle, and I will demonstrate with napkins that I wad into balls. I will recite for you the origin of my fear of nonstick cookware, and explain to you why I will never own a microwave. I will confess to you that I never learned to tie my shoes, have forgotten how to multiply with a pencil and paper, and that I entered high school thinking that the badger was a sort of bird. And I will tell you all of these things because I have no idea what's relevant, have no idea who I am or how to show you, and so I will pour my thoughts over you like a bucket of water, pour out each my thoughts and hope that you are moved to do the same, and that our conceptions of each other grow rich and cluttered as a novel.

Come with me tonight because I swear I can already feel myself begin to calcify. It is so cold outside, it is always so cold here, and I could list for you a thousand things that I hate about the world. And it must be the same for you, you must have your own sorrows building inside of you, settling in your limbs, leaving you heavy and slow and sad.

Listen: I know this might not go well. We might spend our entire evening staring into our drinks, chewing our popcorn, silently reciting all of the excuses we might make to leave early; we might begin and abandon a dozen

conversations because we find that we have nothing in common, and the silences might push us so far apart that we seem to be sitting on opposite sides of a river. You might be unwilling to smile at me when I'm trying to be funny, and I might feign an interest in the Red Wings game just to avoid speaking to you. And it would be so much easier to stay in tonight. I know this. It would be so easy to carry my box of wine into the living room and watch TV-on-DVD until I fall asleep; it would be so easy to sprawl on my sofa, switch off my phone, and let my voicemails pile up like snow.

But I can't bear to stay in anymore. And I know you feel the same way, I know it, because I have seen in you the same things I feel: I have seen your shoulders sink, your face ice over, your smile chip and crack when you realize that, tonight, you will go home, you will warm up a dinner, and you will fall asleep in the same world you woke up in.

So come with me tonight because it will only get worse. We will get old, you and I, we will grow tired, and most of the people we love will disappear. And we'll find it harder and harder to leave our homes, because we will be tethered to all of the terrible things that have happened to us.

So much of the world seems to me so ugly, friend. It seems enormous and sad and pitted from every angle against you and me. But I don't know what to do about this but try, anyway, even if it's hopeless, and to fill my life with the

things and people around me that seem good. And I think that you might be good.

Come with me to Taco Tuesday and we will settle our tab, wave goodnight to Mike Waite, and we will walk outside. The cold will hit us sharply as a slap, but we will linger under a streetlight, you and I, linger for a moment and listen to the karaoke leak from Flanigan's across the street, and though I won't know what I'm doing I will take your hand, I will take your hand and we will be bound together, for now, anyway, a pocket of warmth in the cold and empty night, and that will be enough.

TWO

GOODBYE, DULUTH

When Scott gets home and clatters through the kitchen door, I'm sprawled across his reclining sofa, a mug of red wine perched lightly on my abdomen. Season five of *The Gilmore Girls* is on in the DVD player, and I'm heavily invested.

The apartment is dark, except for the half-light cast by the television. It's only 8:30, but this is December, and it's already been dark for hours. My body is buried beneath a quilt and comforter. My body is a vessel meant to hold Corbet Canyon boxed merlot. My only movement is the rise and fall of the wine on my abdomen. This is my life. I work. I come home. I watch DVD reruns of the WB Network's dramedy, *The Gilmore Girls*.

"HMMMMM," says Scott from the kitchen. He's using his stage goice, his William Shatner monologue voice. "I wonder where Rich could be." He kicks shut the outside door with a *whump*, shaking the walls, sending a rush of cold air into the living room. "I wonder what Rich could be doing to-night."

I roll my eyes and clench my fists. I grab my wine and scoot myself upright, folding my legs beneath me, but then, shit, my foot pops free from the blanket, and then my knee, and now I'm exposed to the air—we're trying to cut the heating bill, Scott and I, so the thermostat's set at 62—now I need to rearrange everything, and a surge of hatred burns through me and collects in my

chest and I'd suddenly like nothing more than to punch Scott hard through his stupid bald head. I take a breath, set the wine on the coffee table with a thud, so that little droplets of it spray on the table, restack the pillows on my lap, and fold the blankets over the pillows so that everything below my waist is draped in bedclothes.

I'm sweating now, and gritting my teeth. I'm a twenty-four year old man and I'm gritting my teeth because my roommate has interrupted my *Gilmore Girls* marathon. It is time, maybe, to assess. And so I fall back, and press the pause button on the remote, and look up at the ceiling. I feel good, sprawled across Scott's sofa, my limbs heavy, as if full of cement. Really: I don't hate Scott. I like living with Scott. And I sit up and look down to where my waist disappears into the blankets and it occurs to me that, perched on the sofa, my back straight, my lap disappearing into the mess of blankets, my legs (like roots!) beneath me, that I look a little like a tree, rising true and tall from the fertile soil of Scott's sofa.

And I look blearily over at the television, at Lauren Graham's broad, lovely face frozen in a smile, and think: I should share this with Scott. I should tell Scott that I look like a tree. But then I open my mouth, close it.

"Scott," I say, staring up at the ceiling again. "Lorelai just proposed to Luke. On *The Gilmore Girls*." My voice is low and phlegmy from the wine. I reach to the table, take another gulp. "Where have you been," I say. Scott's stamping

his feet on the rug, clearing his shoes of snow. "It's finally happened," I say, and I fall back on the sofa. This is what the wine, and the sofa, and the blankets, and the dark does to me. Scott's sofa is a raft, and I'm drifting down the slow stream of my good feeling.

"It's always so dark in here," he says, walking through the kitchen, setting down bags of groceries on the table. He flips on the kitchen's florescent lights.

"You're a caveman, dude."

"No!" I shout, because I hate, I hate florescent lights. I hate the glare. I hate seeing in such sharp relief the flaws of both me and my kitchen. This is one of our differences. Scott is an electrical engineer. He builds circuits in his spare time. He holds informed opinions about different sorts of LED lights, and he wants to share them with you. Two years ago, he designed and built his own tanning bed from parts acquired on Craigslist ("so I can meet girls," he said, when I asked him why). Last summer, he decided he was tired of driving his car around town. He was tired of paying for gas. He liked biking, but Duluth is built on a steep hill, and he didn't want to climb it every day. And so he invented a motorized trailer that, when welded it to his bike, would push him around town. ("Dude, you should see the look cops give me at stoplights!") Just the other night, I came home from work to find cross-legged on the living-room floor with a pile of

chainsaw parts fanned out in front of him. "Hey," he said. "I'm just building a chainsaw."

It astonishes me, the strangeness of his thoughts, the endurance of his impulses. How "I wish I had a tanning bed," turns into, "I should build a tanning bed," turns into a set of plans, turns into a pile of parts in our living room, turns into a functional tanning bed lying parallel to his bed. Though I bewilder him, too. "Seriously?" he said, walking into the living room a couple of weeks ago. "You checked out *The Gilmore Girls*?"

He walks to the doorway, presses his hands against the frame. "The light's in the kitchen, and you're in the living room" he says, pushing against the doorway, then falling forward until his arms are behind him, then pushing himself back up. Scott's been going to the gym, and his arms are beginning to thicken. He looks at me blankly, doing pushups in the doorway. His new goal is to get six-pack abs. He's been watching a lot of bodybuilding DVDs. "Seriously. The light in the kitchen can't be bothering you."

I think for a moment, which is like swimming to the surface from the bottom of a deep lake. I could just turn my back to the kitchen. The light isn't really bothering me.

“Maybe it’s just the principle,” I say, though I don’t know what that means. He keeps pushing himself up and falling forward. He’s wearing a stocking cap, and it’s dusted with snow.

“Is it *snowing* out?”

“Just flurries,” he says. “It’s not supposed to accumulate.” And then he pushes himself up one last time and disappears into the kitchen.

I turn my head back to the television. Lauren Graham’s face is gone, replaced by the screen saver: a little red box pinging back and forth across a blue screen.

From the kitchen, the noise of unpacking groceries. Scott’s been gorging on protein, lately. I can picture his groceries from the living room, all lined up on the kitchen table: cans of tuna, plastic tubs of yogurt and cottage cheese. Some whey protein powder, probably. Shrinkwrapped lumps of ground beef in Styrofoam cartons.

I press play on the remote, grab my wine, flip around on the couch so that I can’t see the kitchen. I turn up the volume one, two ticks, to block out the crinkling of bags and opening and closing of the fridge.

I’ve lost my place in the story. Lorelai’s fighting with her mom, but I don’t remember why.

Scott will get his six-pack. Make no mistake, Scott will get his six-pack.

By day, I work at Glenwood Signs and Awards—that's a sign and trophy shop on First Street downtown. I design and assemble vinyl signs, and you can see my work all over Duluth. Let me show you. Starting at 5th Avenue East, heading west on Superior Street: the banner advertising the MIDI Dinner Theater's performance of *A Christmas Carol*, stretched and flapping outside of the Fitger's complex? That's my work. I update that once a month. Last month was *Brigadoon*. And, before I go on, maybe we should stop so I can tell you more about the vinyl signmaking process. It's like this.

A customer calls the shop. I've been there for over a year now, so as often as not I'm the one who answers the phone. A customer calls the shop. And maybe he owns the liquor store next to the Co-op, and he's tired of Co-op customers parking in his lot. So he wants to put a sign up: CUSTOMER PARKING ONLY. ALL OTHER VEHICLES TOWED AT OWNER'S EXPENSE. And so I'll ask him how large he wants it. What sort of backing he wants—metal, foam-board, whatever.

And I'll lay out a design on the computer. I have my own desk and my own computer because this is a real job. I wake up every morning at 7:30, and I take a bus downtown. There are people on my bus who wear suits. I have my own desk, on which I keep piles of papers, and each pile means something

different. I have a system. But—I'll lay out a design on my computer—nothing flashy, Arial font, a quarter inch red border all around—and then I'll send it to the vinyl cutter. And the vinyl cutter is this big machine, like a printer with a blade—it cuts my design into a sheet of vinyl. And then I bring the sheet over to the worktable, peel away the excess vinyl and until all that's left is my design.

Then I lay down a sheet of transfer tape over the sign, press it flat with a squeegee, and then lift up the tape so that text is affixed to it. Then I take some measurements and squeegee down the whole thing on a metal signboard. Rip off the tape, drill some holes in the blank, and it's a sign. Give the guy a call. Takes me fifteen minutes.

Over there? The Blackrocks Martine Bar? I laid down all those graphics on the windows. They insisted on this loopy script for their logo, and so it was hard getting it down—the letters were thin, and kept tearing on me. But there it is, beneath the awning. It looks good, I think. I've never had a drink there. I make 8.15 an hour.

Up ahead, on First and Superior: I did that sandwich board for Lady Ocalat's Magick Emporium. I ordered some glittery gold vinyl, and found some clipart on my computer of stars and planets. I think she does palm-readings. I'm not sure.

And, really, every For Lease sign that you see—all over town. Those are all me. All of them.

And the big metal sign outside of Dragon Port Comics, down the hill on Second Avenue West—that’s probably my favorite. It took me days to lay that out—the dragon and bridge graphics, the different fonts in different colors. I almost fell from the ladder when I hung it up. Took all afternoon.

And I could go on, really. If you’ve ever watched a city-council meeting—I made the nameplates in front of the councilors. If you watched the University of Minnesota-Duluth women’s hockey team unfurl its championship banner during that ceremony—that was me, too. And it was my fault that the word “champions” was spelled “rchampion”. It was a typo. I didn’t proofread. I’m not always very invested in my job.

Anyway—this is what I do, nine to five. And, when five o’clock comes around, I catch the bus down on Superior, and ride home. If it’s a Tuesday or Thursday, I take the bus heading west so I can donate plasma out at DCI— that’s in the West End neighborhood, all potholes and broken windows and people spitting in doorways. Before I leave for plasma, I grab a handful of marble trophy bases from the shop and stuff them in my pockets and shoes, because DCI takes more plasma if you weigh more than 150 pounds, and if they take more plasma you make more money.

After plasma, I catch the bus east. I lean my head against the window as the bus whirs towards my house because it is dark already, because it has been a long day, because I'm dehydrated from the plasma donation. It'll be good to get home. Tonight will be for wine. Tonight will be for reruns of *The Gilmore Girls*. This is my life. This is my whole life.

Scott and I are at RT Quinlan's, my favorite bar. It's a Friday night, and he's coaxed me out of the house. I haven't been out in a while.

I like coming to RT's this time of year. It's below street-level. It's poorly-lit. The floors are sticky, and the patrons are silent and bearded. They have lived long and difficult lives, and they don't want to discuss them with some skinny kid whose hair hangs down to his goddamn shoulders.

We're sitting at the bar, below a television playing a Bulldogs hockey game and a flickering neon Leinenkuegel's sign.

Scott's face is creased and puffy. He's staring vacantly at the television, sipping at his twenty-two ounce mug of Pabst Blue Ribbon. He seems to be in a contemplative mood.

"I don't know if I'll stay in Duluth," he says, his eyes lowering from the television, now fixed on the middle-distance behind the Leinenkuegel's sign. He'll be graduating with a master's degree this summer—we finished our

bachelor degrees at the same time (his in engineering, mine in English), but Scott immediately enrolled in the master's program, whereas I got a cashiering job at Target—and the engineering department wants to take him on full-time for a year. They want him to be a research assistant.

“Well,” I try, and I rest my twenty-two ounce mug of Summit Extra Pale Ale on my cheek. “Are you happy here?”

At the bar with us: a wan-faced man in a leather jacket. A couple of twenty-something hipsters in stocking caps, laughing. They're drunk. They've come here to get a cheap beer on their way to someplace better. Someplace with music. Someplace with girls wearing smart sweaters and tortoiseshell glasses.

He squints. “No.” He sips again and sets down his mug with a thunk. “I don't think so, anyway. I mean,” and he shifts on his stool and turns his head; I follow his gaze and, down the stairs by the pool-tables, there's a blond girl in a mini skirt, standing with two other girls in similarly short skirts. I didn't notice them when we came in. I can't imagine what they're doing here. They should be in a music-video somewhere. “I mean, it's not like I'm *unhappy*. I'm just bored with school. I don't want to go to school anymore.” His eyes are still on the girl. I wonder if he's going to invite her to use his tanning bed.

I take a drink from my beer and look away from Scott and take a breath because I have some things to say about this, I know a thing or two about

restlessness. "Okay," I say, turning to face him, "I've been reading this book, called *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*. And there's this great line in it. Do you want to hear the line?" He's still looking at the girl. "Are you with me?"

Scott's spins slowly on his stool to face the bar. He looks vaguely perplexed. "Yes," he says. "I want to hear the line." He looks up at the television.

"The line is," I say, looking over at Scott looking up the television, "Happiness is a hounddog in the sun. We aren't on earth to be happy, but to experience incredible things." I pause. "Do you see what that's saying?"

"Um..." says Scott. His eyes fixed on hockey. He takes a gulp of his beer.

"It's saying our goal in life shouldn't be contentment. It shouldn't be comfort. We should want to push ourselves. And feel alive!" I'm waving my hands at Scott. I'm gathering steam. I should give speeches in high-school gymnasiums. "I mean: so many people are just sleepwalking through their lives. Riding on a conveyer belt, waiting to arrive at their deaths. Having no idea who they are, or what they're doing, or where they're going, or why." I slap my palm on the bar. "Nobody knows it's like to be alive anymore, Scott!" I down the rest of my beer, slam down the mug. "I mean, look at me. I'm so content. I'm so happy. Drinking wine to reruns of *The Gilmore Girls*. I'm a hound-dog in the sun"

And Scott turns from the television to face me. He starts laughing "That's it!" he says. "That's exactly what you are. Just an old hound-dog, lying on the

couch. Lapping up his wine. Watching his *Gilmore Girls*." He shakes his head, takes another drink. "That's funny."

My eyes are locked on him. His gleaming, far-away eyes, his shining bald head. "But do you see what I'm saying?" I say.

"No, I do," says Scott. He turns again, towards the mini-skirt girl. She's sitting at a table, now, drinking something florescent from a pint glass. She's leaning forward, her eyes on her friends, her elbows on the table, drinking slowly from a straw. "I should go talk to that girl," he says pointing.

I lean back. "Yeah, you should," I say. And off he goes.

Once a week, Duluth's meteorologists take over the television airwaves and prepare us for the worst.

"There's a system in the Rockies," George Kessler says, his eyes serious behind wire-rimmed glasses. "And it has its sights trained directly on the Arrowhead region." I bite my lip and change the channel.

"It's time to dust of those shovels!" says Karl Spring, bald and middle-aged. "Because this storm is sure to be a doozy!" He looks like an uncle. He uses words like "doozy".

I'd recently sent out applications to graduate school. I wonder if I should go to graduate school, I thought one night. And then searched for schools on Google. And found out I could take the G.R.E. within the week. So I took it, and started sending out applications. This is all the thought that went into my decision.

I sent applications to Minnesota and Montana, for an M.F.A. in fiction. I sent one to Duluth for an M.A. in literature. And one to Northern Michigan University, for an M.A. in writing. I don't know what any of these degrees entails. I don't know what the difference is between an M.A. and an M.F.A. I had a rough week making signs, and wondered if this might be a way out.

So I spent a week filling out applications and taking the G.R.E., but that's all over, now, and my nights have emptied out again. I've watched every episode of *The Gilmore Girls* by now, so I've turned to weather warnings to sustain me. They're my only source of danger. I fall for them every time. And when I'm not watching weather reports, I'm in my bedroom, trolling the internet for the highest snowfall predictions. "Ten to sixteen inches!" I shout to Scott, from my bedroom. "Stock up on canned goods! Do not travel without a winter survival kit! Do not travel at all unless absolutely necessary!"

He eases up to my doorway, stirring a big plastic bowl of meatloaf. "It doesn't ever snow," he says. "You need to stop falling for it."

But I won't, I won't stop falling for it.

Because it isn't impossible. We used to get snow like this here. And, when we did, my friend Tyler (who's since moved to Wisconsin) and I would take out one of our cars—sometimes my Saturn, sometimes his Subaru—and drive up and down the hill so we could brag about it later. (“Karl Spring said to stay home, but, I don't know, my '93 Saturn seemed to do just fine.”) And we'd drive across the lift bridge and park the car by the beach, standing by the lake, filling our lungs with the bitter air, shouting into the wind, our faces stinging with snow and ice and sand. This was what it was like to be alive. It was good to be reminded.

I loved Duluth like this. When it hurts just to stand outside, when the weather is so bad that simply existing feels like an act of defiance against nature. During one storm a few Novembers ago, the wind blew so hard that the waves dislodged a twenty-foot long crib made of railroad ties from the lake's bottom. The lake tossed it around for a few hours before belching it ashore by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Nobody knew what it was—part of a ship? A piece of an old loading dock? We didn't know! And so we visited it during the winter and speculated, kicking at the wood, getting down on our knees to look more closely. Then, the next April, we got another storm, a crippling April blizzard, two feet of snow, and waves reached out and pulled the crib back into the water,

where it floated around for a bit until it washed ashore in Canal Park, a mile away. It still sits there, about fifteen feet up from the water. People like it, so the city leaves it alone.

But Duluth isn't like this anymore. I can't remember the last time it snowstormed, and nothing has lately washed ashore from the lake's bottom. I've grown tired of this place. Of its potholed streets, its impractically steep hill, its gray, unchanging weather. And the hippies that plague the bars, with their dreadlocks and hula-hoops and theories about what really happened on 9/11, man. I'm tired of it. All of it. I want something new. I want twelve to eighteen inches of snow.

But Scott's right. When I wake up the next morning, the grass is still visible outside my window, and the sky is dull and lifeless above it. I drink coffee, get dressed, catch my bus. There's always tomorrow. Maybe it'll snow tomorrow.

THE WAR AGAINST CYNICISM

Consider the barista: working quickly behind the counter, stacking plates and cups on shelves, steaming milk for cappuccinos, taking orders, slamming the register shut, then wheeling around to make another drink. Her red-rimmed glasses sit crookedly on her face and her blond ponytail swings rhythmically behind her as she works.

She's playing music through a set of speakers behind the bakery display case: swelling, sepia-toned torch songs sung by young women with heartbroken voices. It's music for drizzly, too-cold early June mornings, for days spent passing time in cafes until the weather improves. She knows what she's doing.

Outside, through the window to your right, a parade of last night's garbage is tumbling down the sidewalk: plastic cups, hot-dog wrappers, crushed cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon. Pick up your tea, blow at the steam, take a sip.

Okay: today, you will not solve the problem of your loneliness, or devise a plan towards a fulfilling and profitable future; no moments of clarity will flash through your thoughts as you blow the steam from your cup of blackberry tea. But you can find a warm place in this ugly day and drink your tea; you can shut your eyes and imagine something better. Can't that be enough?

The barista: she's from a small town, you'd bet. Newberry, say, or Bruce Crossing—one of those inconceivable places you drive through at night on your way to someplace better and think, slowing to 50, peering down a dark Main Street of shuttered buildings, and bars with entryways clotted by smoking, stoop-shouldered men: what do people *do* here? She has that bright, ironic face, the expression worn by a smart person who recently escaped a stifling and too-small place.

And then a break between songs. The whoosh of the dishwasher in the backroom; the suddenly audible voices of a couple sitting across the room, beneath a black and white framed photograph of an old woman holding a squash. "She's just my friend," says the man, his dark hair carefully tousled. His voice, urgent and raspy, tears through the new silence. "I spend time with her because she's my friend." The woman looks down at her bowl of clam chowder, and you turn away, to your book: a collection of Barry Hannah short-stories—stories about Mississippi, about humid afternoons in small towns, about old men drinking cans of beer on fishing docks. It would be something to be standing on a fishing dock right now, drinking Old Milwaukee with plainspoken people in flannel shirts. Instead, you're in a coffee shop in Northern Michigan. It is foggy and cold. The walls are cluttered with black and white photographs of people holding vegetables, and the display case well-stocked with gluten-free muffins.

You feel stuck in an Urban Outfitters ad, everyone bored and impeccably manicured: even the barista's glasses seem crooked by design, angled to lend her expression a touch of absence and complexity. Her thoughts are elsewhere, you're meant to see.

And then music clicks back on: a cascading piano, cellos and violins, another woman with a cracked voice singing about her loneliness, and then it hits you: hey. You know this song.

Hey!

When life throws you a rope, you grab on; and when a song you know starts playing, you sing along. So lean back in your chair, youngish man, shut your library book and start singing. For you, too, favor piano songs sung by sentimental young women, and you feel suddenly thrust into the world around you. "We're li-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-iving in a den of thieves," you murmur. "Rummaging for answers in the pa-a-ge-es." And then you hear an echo from your left, that last line, drawn achingly out, and you pivot in your seat and meet eyes with a young woman wearing a red handkerchief around her head, tied loosely around her chin. As though she traveled here from 1954; as though she were on her way to a sock-hop. Her expression dreamy, eyes drooping halfshut, mouth hanging open. And she looks at you like that—just like that—for half a second, eyes gleaming, pooled with longing, this woman drained and filled back

up by the music—before she collects herself, smiles brightly, and turns away, dissolving the bridge. But it doesn't matter—everything stops in that half second, and you see your life, your everyday world, made suddenly new—vivid and strange and dripping with new paint. Imagine this town through her eyes; imagine the space she'd fill in your life. And maybe it doesn't add up to anything today—probably it doesn't add up to anything—she has a boyfriend, this young woman, a boyfriend with a beard, who appears from the bathroom, coolly slides a chair next to her, and reaches for her hand. But it doesn't need to add up to anything today. Don't you see? Because tomorrow it might. Tomorrow there might not a man with a beard to break the spell. Tomorrow you might build a bridge that doesn't dissolve.

And you could, you could spend a lifetime tallying grievances, waiting bitterly for the weather to improve, for the art that hangs on walls to make sense, for the barista at the Babycakes Muffin Company to straighten her glasses, pull a chair next to yours, reach for your hand, and improve your life by force. But this isn't how it works. Sometimes it takes a song to remind you: the world will give you nothing. You need to stay alert and hopeful. You need to search for new things to love, and cast off your affection like sparks, too consumed with the pleasure of burning to worry over whether any of them catches.

HAPPY HOMEGROWN

Richard Hackler, you cannot hold still: pattering your hand against your thigh, smiling stupidly into the spring sunlight, whistling loudly to be heard over the rush-hour traffic, over the flannelled smokers swearing in the bus shelter, over the warm wind rushing through the tunnel created by the office buildings and condominium towers stretching modestly skyward in this, our crumbling, our historic downtown Duluth, Minnesota. The air today air is mild, and tinged with the smell of this morning's rain. It is early in May, day six of Duluth's Homegrown Music Festival, and you feel light and witty, as insubstantial and rakish and charming as Gene Kelly, as Fred Astaire.

If only, you think, swaying on the sidewalk, waiting for the crosswalk light to change, if only there were a way to preserve this feeling. A way to keep it alive until the winter, when the nights stretch from mid-afternoon to late morning, when this town grays and freezes and shrinks into itself, when the wind accelerates across the frozen flat lake and fills your backyard with hamburger wrappers from the Burger King across the street, hamburger wrappers that circle in the streetlit air beneath your window, silent and wan as moths. If only you could feel this way then.

To your left, inside Jitters Coffee Shop, sitting straightbacked at a table behind a plate-glass window: a sharp-chinned woman wearing a red beret. She's staring at a book spread open in front of her, frowning, her left hand wrapped around a mug of something steaming. Why is she frowning? Why is she wearing a beret? Look up, you think, taking in her shock of black mathematical hair that stops abruptly at her shoulders, her wrinkles that reach from the corners of her eyes like veins on a leaf. It's too nice a day for coffee shops. Look up. Come outside.

You would tell her: it is spring, finally, it is warm, and my better nature has finally thawed out. I have spent this winter riding busses to jobs I do not care about; I have spent it drinking whiskey from coffee mugs and wearing pajama pants and taking three hour naps on Saturday afternoons because what else is there to do, it always cold and gray. It feels so good to be outside again.

You would tell her: I have seen live music every night this week. Every night! Old flanneled men playing clawhammer banjo in brewpubs. Teenaged boys wearing black eyeliner singing death-metal in smelly underage clubs. Winsome, tired looking women playing acoustic guitars in basement coffee shops. This town is so full of music. Fierce women in babydoll dresses playing joyful, sloppy punk songs in pizza restaurants. We're lucky to live in such a place.

You would tell her: I finally feel lucky to live here, and I want you to feel this way with me. I am leaving in four months, and I'm dreading the thought of it. But I'm happy to be here now. I want you to feel this way with me.

But she's absorbed in her mug of steaming-whatever and her book, so you turn back to face the light (still red, such a long light to cross First Avenue West), and tip backward on your heels. You breathe deeply again, fill your lungs with the saturated air. If you were wearing tap-shoes, you might put on a little show for her. You're in that sort of mood. You are still swaying, still whistling.

And has it ever occurred to anyone, you wonder, looking down, that a city's character can be read in its sidewalks? This sidewalk tells a story. Weathered and chipped, mottled by oil stains, its cracks full of rainwater and pouring up shards of sunlight that dazzle you, make you wince.

Oh, Duluth Minnesota, Zenith City of the Unsalted Seas, your buildings are ruined and your economy depressed, but I could write a poem about your sidewalks.

You're only twenty-four years old, but you've got some ideas about things.

If someone were to walk up to you right now, if someone were tap you on the shoulder and ask you to say something pithy and wise, to distill your

accumulated wisdom down to its quivering core, you would rest your hand on your inquisitor's shoulder, look into his searching face and say, friend: always whistle loudly when you wait for crosswalk lights to change. You never know what will happen when you whistle loudly.

You never know what will happen!

Imagine a pretty girl in a knit-cap and peasant skirt—one of those kind, irrepressible people who occur here the same way snow and seagulls occur here—stopping on the sidewalk in front of you, her eyes vacant, her mouth hanging open, before recognizing the melody and lighting up and clasping her hands beneath her chin and mouthing along:

Oh, I went and seen the entire nation

And we've got the cheapest refrigeration

To tell you the truth

I like it in Duluth!

It's not impossible. This town is full of music, and everyone knows the same songs. Father Hennepin sings this song, and they're playing tonight. At RT Quinlan's, the basement bar—sticky tiled floors, urinal with decomposing purple cake reeking of ammonia, flickering neon *Old Style* sign above the bar, cloudy

jars of pickled animal parts lined up next to the bottles of liquor. Father Hennepin, the country band led by the skinny, kind-eyed, forty-year old man who owns the t-shirt shop up on top of the hill. Father Hennepin will play this song tonight and you'll sing along, pressed up to the stage, swaying in time with whoever's next to you (young woman in knit cap or bearded man in flannel shirt or pale-faced boy with stud in lip), with the hundreds of other people crowded inside, most of whom you recognize, most of whom will bellow along with you.

We get summer here

Two weeks in July

The rest of the time it's cold and rainy

And the snow falls all the time.

What a strange place, this dying inland port, founded by miners and loggers, and still full of hale old men who eat pickled herring and brew their coffee with crushed eggshells, who drink black coffee and eat eggs and bacon each morning at the Sunshine Café—but also, now, swarming with artsy types, young people who wear twine bracelets around their knobby wrists, who wear t-shirts that say things like CARS ARE COFFINS or WICCAN AND PROUD, who juggle part time jobs at Pizza Luce and Great Harvest Bread and Amazing Grace

so they can strum acoustic guitars and sing socially-conscious folksongs on weekends. Why are you leaving this place?

This town was built for you. You are a skinny and artsy young person who rides a bicycle! You juggle jobs at Target and the public library so you can afford to attend folk-music events on weekends! And standing on the sidewalk, swaying in the early summer wind, you can't remember why you've decided to move. What are you thinking? What are you thinking?

And then the light changes and you are still whistling, whistling as you nod to a beaming old man crossing the street from the other side, a rounded man in a yellow golf-shirt and a sea-captain beard, a Marshmallow Peep of a man, as you smile at a little girl pulling her tired-looking teenaged mother across the street, a bright little blur of a person, her hair waving in the breeze like prairie grass, as you hop onto the opposing curb. Whistling because this is still your town, because you are brimming with the afternoon, because it feels as though a barrel has overturned in your chest and flooded your limbs, and you will burst if you don't let some of this good feeling leak out.

You cross Lake Avenue, cross Superior Street, and then slow to a stop outside of Pizza Luce. You squint inside, past your reflection. The stage is empty, and the

dance floor is cluttered with tables: families eating pizza with forks, skinny twenty-somethings drinking tallboys of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

You are moving in four months—five hours east, for graduate school, for an MFA program in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Which is home of what, exactly? You can only speculate. Malamutes, collapsed sheds, taxidermied deer.

Out in the fragrant sunshine, drunk on music and warm weather, it is easy to forget why you'd leave this place. But you know why you're leaving.

The Duluth winter: Saturday nights are the worst. A summer Saturday in Duluth is unlimited in its possibility. And you stare into the mirror on one of these days, four o'clock, the afternoon still bright, the windows open and the breeze blowing in so that even your crappy little apartment—linoleum floor peeling, wallpaper yellowing—is windblown and fragrant as a city park. And when you stare into the mirror after brushing your teeth (a little crooked, but only a little!) and drying your hair (long, but it suits you!), you will think, okay, there are more attractive people in this world: but there are *less* attractive people, too. And you will smile into the mirror—what a gift, to be average!—and button your shirt, leave your apartment and rush the evening, ready to wring from it whatever it has to offer—you will listen to earnest young people read poetry in the library lobby, maybe, or stumble into a moshpit at The Rex, or kiss a girl wearing a leather jacket outside of the casino or sit on a bench in Leif Erickson

Park and look up at the moon, bright and improbable and hanging over the lake like some affable, beaming god—armed only with your easy smile and loose-limbed charm.

But a winter Saturday night. It was a Saturday night when you vowed to move. Sitting at your kitchen table, staring outside, at the trees bending in the wind, at the garbage blowing around in the wan light, you imagined a different life: people went to graduate school, you know. Maybe you could go to graduate school. You imagined health-insurance and a bathroom larger than a broom-closet. You imagined dinner-parties, and bookclubs, and all the waitresses you'd flirt with at the restaurants you could afford to eat at. You looked outside at the garbage blowing around in the premature dark and felt yourself hissing flat, because you would never get these things here, because to live in Duluth is to have a crappy apartment and two jobs, neither of which suits you; it is to have potential, maybe, but to be sodden with it: spending your mornings cashiering at Target, your afternoons shelving books at the library, your nights staring dumbly at the television, too tired to wonder if you were meant for something better.

And so: sitting one night in your dimming kitchen, feeling as hollow and ruined as your city, you made a resolution: I will go to graduate school, you thought. And then said it out loud: "I am going to graduate school". Then spent the next month writing statements of purpose, taking tests, ordering transcripts.

This is why you're leaving, you think, still squinting into Pizza Luce.

Don't forget why you're leaving.

Okay. But tear yourself from your reflection and start walking again, skip over a puddle and shove your hands into your pockets, think okay, I am leaving, but not for four months. I am here now, and today is a gift. I am twenty-four years old, I am feeling confident, I have forty dollars in my wallet because I donated plasma this week, and this town is mine. And keep walking, resisting the urge to skip, because you have your whole evening ahead of you, because you will see fifteen bands at five different venues, and you are going to absorb the entire experience like a plant absorbs sunlight.

And because this is Duluth, Minnesota, and because your afternoon really is charmed, you squint against the sunlight and see, a half-block down the sidewalk, in front of the check-cashing store, a young woman wearing a flannel poncho. Her back is arched, she's perched on her toes, her arm is in the air and she's waving at you—a full-bodied, frantic wave, as though she were your lover and you were receding from her on a ship. Next to her, a tall, knobby young man with spiked purple hair is grinning at his shoes.

You stop, turn around, squint down the block. There's no one else. She's waving at you.

So you turn around and lift your arm in the air and open your hand and smile at her, and hope that your smile carries, and it does, it must, because she hops when you smile, once, right there on the sidewalk (a world of poetry and possibility in that hop!). And then she's walking fast towards you, almost running, her arms working, a sort of power walk. Her knobby friend lopes to keep up. He's still watching his shoes.

"It's you!" she says, stopping just in front of you, touching your forearm and twittering her fingers up and down your flannel sleeve before dropping her hand to her side. She is short, this girl, with silver earrings shaped like cats shining in the light, and a wave of blond hair spilling from a green knit cap that stops just above her shoulders. She's so bright, this girl, so vibrant, a gathering of the afternoon's warmth and light. Her eyes are green and gleaming and locked happily with yours, and you feel a presence in your chest as she smiles up at you, an expanding, quivering something, a vibrating cellphone, and you rock on your feet because you cannot hold still.

"I can't believe it!" she says, and you think, there must be a spotlight trained on you, you are being filmed, this has been scripted. "I've always wanted

to meet you!" She has the stoned inflection and rubber-band vowels of someone who spends a lot of time playing hacky-sack.

"And here I am!" you say, holding out your arms. You do not know what this is, but you will not, you will not spoil it.

Her friend—tall and pale, maybe eighteen years old, his forehead broad and smooth as exposed bone—smiles and gives you a furtive little nod. You nod back, hoping he's a brother, or a cousin—

"I see you everywhere, man," says the girl. "Wherever I am I see you and I think, 'that guy just looks so cool. I've gotta meet that *guy*'."

I have known people like her before, you think. I'll bet she owns a hula-hoop. I'll bet her refrigerator is full of kombucha. She's the sort of person who thrives here, an extension of the landscape, and I'm thrilled that she's found me and marked me as one of hers. You could give her a hug. You need to resist the urge to give her a hug.

"What's your sign, man?" she says, and you burst out laughing, you cannot help it.

"Oh, he's a Virgo!" says the boy. "Look at him: you can tell he's a Virgo!"

"No," you say, looking through the window of Takk for Maten, the Norwegian sandwich shop. Chairs overturned on empty tables. "I'm a Leo." You nod, turn back to face them. "Yeah, I'm a Leo."

“Huh,” says the boy, shaking his head. Stunned, smiling. “I could’ve sworn you were a Virgo.”

“Do you know when Trampled by Turtles are playing?” says the girl. “I’m so excited for the Trampled by Turtles show tonight.” And you imagine what this show will be like: Trampled by Turtles is a bluegrass band, and they attract masses of barefooted hippies to their shows. There will be young women dancing wildly, elbowing you in the face, their dreadlocks circling their heads like propeller blades; there will be bearded men hugging you, bearded men you have never met, spilling your beer, filling you up with the stench of sweat and patchouli lotion.

But look: look at this girl looking up at you. And then you forget about the bearded men, the sharp-elbowed women: you will ingest fistfuls of psychotropic mushrooms, if that’s what it takes. You will punch people in the face as you dance and smell like a headshop and kick off your shoes. Whatever it takes to get this person—this impossibly bright and vibrant person—to keep looking at you like she is.

“Ten o’clock,” you say. “At Pizza Luce.” You have tonight’s schedule memorized. For you are the sort of young man who sits on a park bench and takes the time to memorize the Homegrown Music Festival schedule.

She touches your arm, lets it linger, pulls her hand away. You imagine yourself marked; you imagine her fingers burning an impression into your arm. "Good," she says. "Good." And then, "You should come. You should meet me there."

"I will," you say, and she smiles.

"I'll see you then," she says, and she touches your arm again as she flits past you, away, down the sidewalk. The purplehaired boy strides to keep up.

"Happy Homegrown!" she says over her shoulder.

"Happy Homegrown!" you say back.

And as you walk away from her down the sidewalk, past the chocolate shop, past the kitchen supplies store, you glance backward and start singing, under your breath at first, then louder, because you feel too good, and this town is too beautiful, for whistling.

All of these people, you think, crossing First Avenue East, walking past the check cashing store and the Coin and Stamp Emporium. How lucky I am to be here, to be counted among them.

Such people. Who live in this weird and far-flung place against every practical consideration. Whose hands are cracked from jumpstarting their Civics and Gremlins in the morning. Whose faces are peeling from bitter February

walks along the lake—because winters are long, and spring doesn't arrive until May, and you need to do something, you need to, to keep the wind from hollowing you out, to keep yourself out of pajama pants and off of the sofa. So Duluthians do things: *we* do things. We are out, always, walking along the frozen lake, boundless and forbidding as a desert, peering over the cliffs in our city parks, snowshoeing the surfaces of creeks and climbing waterfalls frozen like stalled escalators. We shed our boredom like dead skin so that we are always full, always brimming, with energy, with love, with the raw material of poetry. Yes! Which we then fashion and shape into art (we start punk bands, we compose sonnet sequences, we paint snowscapes), because we are nothing if not artists: just poor, just cold, just underemployed.

And I forget this too often. I forget to stay vigilant in the cold and dark. I forget my youth.

This is what you're thinking as you walk past the Coney Island hot dog restaurant.

And then you shake these thoughts away and sprint across 2nd Avenue East because there is a folk show about to start, and you're late, you're late. Sometimes, when you stop to consider your future, when you stop and think about the world surrounding this town, you feel like a diver about to plunge into too-deep, too-dark water. There will soon be larger things to worry about, you

think. Your concerns might run deeper than where will that girl wearing a poncho be later tonight.

But right now, the afternoon is bright. Right now, you are sprinting down the sidewalk because you are young. And isn't it something to be young.

“ANY DOUCHEBAG CAN PLAY THE GUITAR,”

My roommate the guitarist said, when I told him I wanted to learn. He pointed a plastic spoon at me and nodded, talking through a mouthful of chicken.

“I mean, look at the people who are good at playing guitar,” he said.

“Most of them are dumb. Most of them are douchebags.” He was leaning back against our kitchen counter in a loungey, James Deanish way, eating a can of cold Campbell’s Soup that he held in his left hand. “It tastes like shit anyway,” he’d told me once. “So heating it is a waste of time.”

This was mid-afternoon, early in February, and the sun had already started to set. It’d been cloudy for weeks, and nights arrived so suddenly, so quietly, that we were always forgetting to flip on lights. Oh, I would think, raising my eyes from a book, waking from a nap, looking across the room at the black windows of our rented house. It’s night again.

For seven years, I’d lived among the legions of ineffectual young men who save their money, spend it on acoustic guitars, and then hide them in their closets when it turns out that learning to play is hard. But no more, I decided. No more.

You could rebuild a life during the passing of a winter. You could write books. You could learn a language. You could play the guitar.

“Then I will be that douchebag,” I said to him, clapping my hands once, twice. The sound congealed and hung in the stale air between us, then dissipated. “Just you wait.”

At night, I would lie in bed and listen to my roommate practice in the basement. The floors were thin, and the lilting melodies of the songs he played—by the Kinks or Paul McCartney, or sometimes an original that he picked and sang quietly, shyly—would curdle as they rose to my bedroom, and reach me as reproach

You quit rather than risking failure, they said.

My limbs buzzed with unspent urgency that winter. I had to concentrate to keep from flipping on my bedside lamp, from kicking off my blankets, from rising to my feet and pacing. And my roommate kept playing.

You are a study in wasted potential.

I’d stretch and flatten myself on the mattress, staring up at the ceiling, at the slats of streetlight leaking through the blinds, wishing I could sink farther into the bed, wishing I could become the bed, mourning the time I’d wasted and was soon to waste, turning my head to watch the window lighten from black to gray.

My roommate, though. The world around him dies, and he sits in our basement and sings “Maybe I’m Amazed” into the void. He must feel the same things. This expansion and emptying of time. The loneliness of this house we occupy like a suit several sizes too large for us.

But listen to him: “Baby, I’m a man!” he sings, his voice bubbling above a whisper. “Maybe I’m a lonely man who’s in the middle of something he doesn’t really understand!” Listen to him trying. Listen to him straining towards something, at least.

So why not you, Richard Hackler? The guitar in your closet could be the spark that ignites your transformation! So rise from your bed, now, rise, and pull it out from behind your t-shirts and pants. Sit atop your mattress with your legs folded beneath you and study chord charts by lamplight. Struggle for hours—hours!—at learning the F chord alone, strumming over and over again, the guitar heavy on your lap, your fingertips burning as if singed: you are expected to hold down two strings with your pointer finger alone. But how? Your fingers are so weak. And then to switch between chords, F to G, without that five second pause, that terrible silence that swallows the room as you fumble, as you look down at the chord chart, beginning to sweat, glaring at your impotent hand, your worthless left hand, hanging limply from the neck of your guitar, then finally positioning your fingers and strumming, three times, updown updown

updown, before switching and fumbling again. When will this become effortless?
When will you be able to play a song, goddamnit, a song?

I don't know. But onward, anyway, until your voice dries to a rasp, until your fingertips grow rubbery and hard. This restlessness is a gift, maybe: so massage it, focus on it, distill and perfect it and then funnel it into the four-chord pop songs of others! And maybe it will mean something, this act of articulation and expulsion. Maybe this is what other people know that you don't. Maybe it will be enough. Maybe the winter will pass. Maybe you'll get some sleep.

Who can understand what anyone thinks and feels? Who can read the inner workings of another's heart? Not me, that's for sure. But isn't this a nice thought—isn't it?—that I might learn a few chords, wrap my voice around a melody, and articulate for anyone interested a map of my heart? That in these songs I play and sing—not even my songs! Big Star, Bob Dylan, Replacements songs—that in these songs might be encoded a shorthand of the dense and unknowable things written within me? How else to translate? How else to communicate this impossible ache?

Listen to me, please: it is February, it is cold and dark, and I live inside my loneliness like a room. But listen as I fill it with music! Listen to me pound at the walls! And I will keep at it until someone hears me, until someone finds in these

songs a shared experience, an island we can swim to from opposing shores, until
my voice is so clear and my fingers so sure that I cannot be mistaken, until
someone tells me to shut up, already, put down the guitar, until someone looks
at me steadily and says hey, me, too. Me, too.

HOUGHTON ESCAPE!

We're in Baraga, Michigan, a half-hour south of Houghton. Cameron is sitting to my right, in the passenger seat of my 1993 Dodge Shadow, watching Lake Superior out his window, the water glinting and wrinkled like a sheet of tinfoil, and Brooke is silent in my backseat. I'm driving, squirming in my seat, playing The Pogues on my car stereo—a mess of mandolins, tin whistles, slurred vocals—because this is music that makes me squirm, that makes my chest ache, that fills me with the desire to sing. I'm playing it because I haven't felt this way in so long. I'm tapping out the rhythm on my steering wheel, singing under my breath.

Then Cameron turns to face me, his seatbelt straining against his black peacoat. "Have I told you that it's one of my goals to eat a lion?" he says. He sweeps his hand through his hair and falls back in his seat, pattering his hand against his thigh. "Just once," he says.

Here is Cameron—avid hunter, skilled poet, aspiring eater of exotic game—riding with me to Houghton to play a rugby match in the snow. "Like a lion steak," he says, and I look over at him then: his shoulder-length blond hair tied up into a samurai knot, his eyes trained on me, light blue and sharp, so flinty you might strike a match against them. Cameron, who walks with a limp because

his knees are ruined by rugby injuries, whose first solid food as an infant was a thin slice of pickled deer heart, who, of all my friends, seems to me the most likely to someday kill something with a battle ax.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to hunt lions,” I tell him, and then laugh, because here I am, driving through Baraga, supporting my end of a conversation about eating lions.

Today is sunny, for the first time in weeks, and the landscape looks washed out, overexposed. My eyes ache from squinting through the windshield, from squinting through the sunlight, but I don’t care.

We are away from our homes! We are driving to Houghton!

Behind me, Brooke is stretched languidly across my backseat, sketching on a legal pad propped against her knees. Brooke is Cameron’s friend—pretty, pale-eyed and quiet, her hair braided into a thick blond rope that hangs to the middle of her back—and she’s riding along to attend the Houghton Winter Carnival with me. Neither of us knows what a winter carnival is—we’ve heard rumors of snow-sculptures, of broomball, of spearmint schnapps poured into glasses made of ice—but it doesn’t matter. I needed so badly to get out of town. Brooke had nothing else to do. Cameron had a rugby match. Let’s ride together. Okay.

I glance at Brooke in my rearview mirror: her head resting against the window and seat-cushion, the corners of her mouth turned sharply down. Her face broad and placid, her face a frozen lake, and her gaze vacant, as if turned inward, as if she were staring at her soul and sketching out a lifelike replica. If I shouted her at her right now, I don't think she'd respond; if I drove the car into a tree, I think she'd keep drawing.

"Maybe I could get one from a lion farm," says Cameron, and I turn back to him. "I mean, are there lion farms? There should be. If people started *farming lions*, they'd be increasing the number of lions. They'd be conservationists!"

I nod, once, twice, and turn back to the road. "That's a good point," I say, and smile. The air in my car is warm, and smells faintly of the coffee and Sunchips we consumed to begin our trip.

I feel expansive and soaked in sunlight; I feel as benevolent as a god.

The three of us live in Marquette, a hundred miles southeast of Houghton in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. It is a place that, most often, seems built for me— if I exit my apartment and walk south for twenty minutes, I arrive at a downtown full of bars and coffee shops and bakeries. If I walk the same distance north, I'm alone, surrounded by water and trees. But it's the beginning of February now, and I've lately grown so restless: it's been a long and ugly winter. A few inches of snow fell in the middle of December, but it melted immediately,

soaked up the street's oil and dirt, and then refroze in sooty, jagged clumps that still cling to our curbs like parasites. The sky is low and bruised every day, and everything surrounding us—the lake, the buildings, the sky and street and sidewalks—has turned the same sickly gray, as if someone pulled a plug and all of our town's color leaked away.

I squint past Cameron, out the window, out at the lake. Baraga is built on a bay, and across the water I can see L'Anse, a town of low, faded brick buildings, which we just passed through, which I know nothing about.

This world is bigger than I remember. This world is bigger than I think. I turn to face my windshield, and push myself back in the seat.

Oh, friends, we are escaping, and just in time. We are escaping to Houghton.

Past Baraga, Highway 41 veers away from the water and there is less to look at. Brooke is still drawing in the backseat, and Cameron has fallen silent, staring out the window at the trees blurring by. The landscape here is hilly, and the road cuts and ribbons through the woods like a river. I steer my car lightly and deftly, using only my fingertips, as if I'm leading it in a dance.

I swear to God, this car is material expression of whatever's inside me that's good. I swear to God, I could write you a book about this car.

This is my 1993 Dodge Shadow!

Whose hood is held shut by pins, whose exhaust system once overheated and started my trunk on fire, but which gets remarkable gas mileage when traveling at constant speeds on the highway! Which goes about its business inelegantly—shuttering, whining, spewing out plumes of noxious smoke like distress signals—but which has never, not once, left me stranded!

I lean forward in my seat, lifting my right hand from the wheel, catching it with my knee, and I turn up the music one, two ticks. I sing under my breath as I fall back, grabbing the wheel again, and I look over at Cameron, wishing that he knew this song, wishing that Brooke would put down her legal pad, wishing they felt this same urgency and would sing it out with me.

This morning on the harbor when I said goodbye to you

I remember how I swore that I'd come back to you one day

And as the sunset came to meet the evening on the hill

I told you I always loved you, I always did, I always will.

“What’s that?” says Cameron, turning from the window and squinting at me, his eyes gleaming like knifeblades. “What did you say?” Cameron, who deserves a more nuanced portrait than the one I’ve given of him so far, who doesn’t only stalk wildlife and play rugby. Cameron, who memorizes Shakespeare monologues for fun and publishes poetry in journals across the

country; whose writing and conversation are teeming with Scandinavia: with Vikings, with cold, with wolves and wolfmen and silent, moonlit snowscapes; who seems built of different parts than I am, and doesn't feel oppressed by winter, but soaks in the long nights and cold weather like sunlight.

"I was singing," I say, and he nods once, biting his lip, before twisting around and resting his chin on the corner of his headrest.

"Hey, Brooke," he says. "Whatcha drawing?"

She jerks her head up, her eyes wide, face stricken, before blinking and shaking her head and smiling. "Oh," she says, and flips her legal pad over for Cameron to see. Brooke's a poet too, and she told me once that she only writes in the winter, that she feels sluggish and sapped in the summer; that she longs to live in Finland, somewhere near the Arctic Circle, where it's colder, darker, emptier, even, than Michigan's Upper Peninsula (with its 19.3 people per square mile and seven hours of tepid daylight in December).

I turn around in my seat, glance at her drawing. "Are those mushrooms?" I say. "Have you been sitting in my backseat for an hour drawing mushrooms?" On her paper, a mushroom cap sketched in red ink, surrounded by smaller replicas. A mushroom planet and its orbiting family of fungal moons.

"No, dude, it's your *hat*," she says.

“Oh,” I say, and then I see it: she’s drawn my stocking hat. “Ha.” I lift my right hand from my thigh, run my fingers over my hat, let it drop.

When I talk to people about the winter, I revert to war and disease similes: the winter spreads like a *plague*, see, and leaves the landscape ravaged, like a *battlefield*.

But I feel good right now. Maybe my friends’ sensibilities are rubbing off on me. Maybe I’m just happy to be in my car, driving away with these people as vivid, as thrilling and complex and mysterious as overseas continents.

Either way, it doesn’t matter. Either way, let’s keep driving.

And then we’re in Houghton. We drop off Cameron at the high school overlooking the city—this is where his rugby match is—then drive my car back downtown. This is our plan: we will walk slowly from my car through the carnival, whatever it is, then back up the hill, back to Cameron, and arrive in time to watch the second half of his match.

Houghton is small and quaint, the sort of place that should be enclosed in a snowglobe, or frozen in a Normal Rockwell painting—cobblestone streets, redstone buildings, a steep bluff that tumbles into a canal—but it feels larger today. I clap my mittened hands once, and lead us forward, down the sidewalk, into the swift stream of people, there are so many people: stumbling swarms of

kids in florescent parkas, shuffling men in muted flannel, staggering frat boys bellowing into cellphones, thrilled to be so drunk so early in the afternoon. There are flocks of beaming college girls, their hair hidden beneath fur-lined hoods, their faces reflecting sunlight like moons; there are severe, there are angular old women walking dogs wearing sweaters, who lurch forward on their leashes, pulling the women reluctantly forward.

Houghton has snow, and lots of it: piled waist-high on the curbs, packed hard on the streets. Every surface is white, and pours sunlight up into our eyes.

I am alive, I finally remember: I have lately grown sluggish and my life has turned stale, but it doesn't matter. I have shed my past like a set of wet clothes. I am reinvented. I am made new in Houghton.

The carnival stretches across most of the town, and consists almost entirely of enormous ice dioramas that people have built in their front yards. Brooke and I are standing now in front of one of the displays, a depiction of an entire Calvin and Hobbes comic strip: there's a car, a house, a line of snowmen, Calvin, Hobbes. The entire display stretches across a few lots, and takes up most of a city block.

"This is amazing," I say, looking over at Brooke. The air here feels charged: by spectacle and strangeness, by a shared, giddy sense of boredom relieved and darkness overcome. It seems so unlikely to me that anyone would

live here, in Houghton, this tiny place on the way to nowhere. It seems even less likely that the people who do live here would be the sort to fill it with sculptures of Calvin and Hobbes.

“I can’t even imagine how they begin doing this,” Brooke says, staring openmouthed at the display. “Or, hey! Maybe *they* don’t even do it. Maybe aliens do it. Maybe it’s like the pyramids.” Her face is flushed, her eyes shining.

“Yeah!” I say, because what do I know, I will listen to everything Brooke tells me, maybe aliens did build the pyramids. “And, like, the locals wake up one morning and they see that the ice-sculptures are back, and they know it’s time for the Winter Carnival again...”

Brooke and I are standing on a sidewalk in Houghton, Michigan—population seven-thousand, recipient of two-hundred and fifty inches of snow per year, a six hour drive to Milwaukee, the nearest major city—and we are becoming friends.

We linger and drift through all of the exhibits. We are here to take this in.

There is the *Moby Dick* display—a wide-mouthed whale arcing out of a snow, and a wizened Ahab (his face impeccably carved, lined with worry) standing and scowling from his boat, ten feet away; a *Jurassic Park* exhibit—tyrannosaurus rex, velociraptor, scores of grimacing, two foot tall dinosaurs

scurrying away; an *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* exhibit, peopled with Alice, dormouse, Mad Hatter, tea-set.

I stare for five minutes at the Mad Hatter—sitting at his table, his teacup raised inches from his lips—and wonder over the ingenuity behind this, the mad determination: an engineering student in Houghton staying up all night, shivering in his floodlit front yard, carving out little tea-cups from blocks of ice.

We take it all in. We wander to the backs of sculptures and admire the scaffolding that holds them together: two-by-fours, plywood, nails and glue. We lean forward and peer into the empty eyes of the Ice Jesus at the *Holy Bible* exhibit; we kneel and run our fingers along the smooth wheels of the Little Engine that Could. We are sponges thirsty for imagery and light; we are observant as art-collectors, as anthropologists.

“Did you see the clock?” Brooke says, pointing up in front of the Harry Potter exhibit. And there it is, along the wall, above the ice-train: the clock’s face is clear, and the numbers and hands expertly carved. I wonder, for a giddy second, if it’s actually keeping time.

We walk across town, usually a twenty minute trip, but draw it out for two hours. We stop and watch part of a drunken broomball taking place on an ice-rink in front of the university, a mess of hooting, laughing, falling down, getting back up (“You okay, chief?” shout the drunken broomballers to one

another.) We note, with a little thrill every time, the tiny ice dinosaurs scattered all across town, refugees fleeing the *Jurassic Park* exhibit. I feel, throughout all of it, about twelve years old.

“Hey,” I say, grabbing Brooke’s arm, steering us past the exhibit at the Lutheran Church, which is lame, laaaaaame, we both agree: a giant open Bible spread across their front lawn. They could’ve done better. Come on. “Look. Stop.”

We’re near the edge of town, at the end of the carnival, walking through a neighborhood of drafty, boxy houses, the sort that thrives in college towns: scratched wood floors, high ceilings, leaky windows; the sort of building that once housed one lumber baron but now contains eight college students.

I’ve pulled Brooke and I to a stop in front of one of these houses. The driveway is empty, and the house looks deserted. But on the roof, just outside the windows of an upstairs bedroom, stand five dogs—one golden retriever, the rest vague, gray, shaggy—lined in perfect formation, as if under the auspice of a drill-sergeant, barking loudly at everyone passing below them on the sidewalk.

Brooke and I stare with our hands brimmed flat against our foreheads. Two minutes pass before either of us speaks. The dogs keep barking, jumping in place each time, their breaths freezing, hanging, dissipating in front of them. They are passionate, full-bodied barkers.

“It’s like the dogs took over this house,” I say, and try to imagine the narrative. An eccentric copper millionaire never married, and willed his house to his pets. A band of mistreated dogs murdered their mistress, and now they run things on their own. Behind us, on the sidewalk, people are streaming by, not noticing, or, anyway, not stopping. This is old-hat, it seems. This is the house in Houghton that’s run by dogs.

“Did you bring a camera?” I ask Brooke, and she shakes her head.

“I’ve stopped taking pictures,” she says. “When I take pictures, I feel too hung-up on taking pictures. You know? On worrying about how I’ll remember things later. I just want to be *here*.”

I know what she means. I feel here. Look at where we are, I think, staring at Brooke and feeling happy to be near her; Brooke, who seems to be absorbing something religious from the experience—her eyes wide, her head tilted back. We are so isolated up here, and it is always dark and cold, but look at what strangeness and beauty we can conjure when we try. And for the first time in months, I’m happy to be here. For the first time in months, I understand.

The rest passes in a rush. We leave the carnival and plod up the hill, back towards Cameron, talking vaguely about lofty things. What do we want to do with our lives? We do not know. Maybe we’ll live adventurously in exotic

locales. Or we might live small, and near our families. We're too young for these decisions. We'll sort it out later.

Then, the rugby game, which we watch while shivering and standing in knee-deep snow. I don't understand any of what I see—it's action without sense, grunting and tackling and there is a ball. Maybe Cameron will sit me down someday and explain the rules. Maybe I'll join him for a match and we'll sing fight songs afterward, limping and bellowing, passing between us a leather canteen filled with mead.

Then the match is over, and it's dark, suddenly (the darkness at this latitude falls like a curtain) and we're back in my car, the three of us, driving south down Highway 41. The Shadow's console lights have stopped working—a fuse is blown, or something—and I can't see the speedometer. I gauge my speed based on the cars whipping around me, on the feel of the passing trees.

"Oshkosh!" says Cameron. "In Wisconsin!" Behind me, a car flashes its brights, swerves into the other lane, honks bitterly as it drives by. "Has anyone said Oshkosh?"

"I don't think so," says Brooke, leaning forward, bringing her head level with ours. "Someone said 'Ontonagon' earlier, but not Oshkosh."

So Brooke needs to think of a place that starts with the letter "h," the last letter in "Oshkosh". This is the game we're playing.

She slumps back in her seat, and I hum with my music. It's still The Pogues. I'm letting it play over and over.

Oh friends, oh Brooke and Cameron, it's true. It's still February, and our town is still at its ugliest. The sun will disappear tomorrow, probably, and the sidewalks will still be grimy and slick with ice, but that isn't the end of it.

"Oh!" says Brooke, surging forward again. "Haaparanta!" She claps, once, and falls back her seat with a triumphant thump.

"Haaparanta?" says Cameron, in a flat, you-must-be-kidding voice.

"Goddamnit. *Real* places, Brooke. Real places only."

"It's real!" she says. "It's real. It's in Finland."

He turns around, shakes his head. "Fucking Finland," he says, exhaling.

"Always with the fucking Finland." And it's my turn again.

Oh friends, it's true: the world around us is dead, and the weather still ugly and inhospitable. But we won't leave. Oh, no, we won't leave. We are indomitable, you and me, and we will paint our town bright with optimism. And our lives will push back, sure, but let them, let them. We will smile grimly and dig in our heels; we will wear layers and build a fucking carnival.

THE BALLAD OF ROY BUCK

Roy Buck and I were throwing a Frisbee in Lake Superior, trying to keep cool, and he was feeling good. He stood twenty feet away from me, waist deep in the water. "Do you know where you are?" he shrieked up at the sky. His left hand contained the Frisbee, which he slapped rhythmically against his sloping belly, and his right hand was clenched into a fist in front of him. "You're in the jungle, baby!" He ran his hand through his dripping hair and crashed it down into the water. "And you're gonna die!" Then he spread his tattooed arms, fell backward, and disappeared into the water.

Between us on the water, Althea, his pitbull mix, was paddling back and forth, yipping nervously. I was floating on my back, staring sleepily up at the bright, washed-out sky.

Five, ten seconds passed. Althea kept yipping.

And then Roy resurfaced with a crash, water coursing down his back, resplendent as a sea-monster. He pointed the Frisbee at me. "Go deep!" he shouted, double pumping, and I sunk to my feet. "It's the fourth quarter!" So I turned around and started running away from him, lifting my legs high to pick up speed through the water.

This is how it was that summer. Every morning, I woke up to find my cellphone blinking on my nightstand, full of voicemails from Roy. "Richard, what's up," these messages would begin. And then he would tell me about his day so far, which always began three hours before mine. "It's Roy. Day's alright so far. Woke up around seven and took Althea for a walk. Then I ran some errands, went down to the DMV and renewed my license, filled out some paperwork, and I just hate, I fucking hate, doing stuff like that. But whatever! Whatever! Then came back here. Now I'm drinking some coffee, laying low, wondering if you want to go throw the Frisbee around." His voice was always low and smoky through my phone, always Isaac Hayesish, as though he were trying hard to seduce me, trying hard to get into my pants.

"Ten seconds!" he was shouting at me now, across the water. "Nine! Eight! Go deep, go deep!" So I took a breath and dove under, swimming as fast I could, the water shockingly cold against my sunsoaked arms. I swam until I couldn't hold my breath anymore, and resurfaced, gasping, on the other side of the cove which we'd come to every morning, a secluded spot downtown that no one else seem to know about, and which we'd claimed as ours. I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hand and looked up: the Frisbee was arcing over and away from me, as surely as a bird.

“Dive!” Roy shouted, slapping his palm against the water again and again. “Dive!” So I took a breath, pushed my feet from the rocky bottom, and threw myself into the air, just high enough, just long enough to trap the Frisbee between my hands. I hung in the air for a triumphant half-second and crashed into the water with the Frisbee.

When I hang out with Roy Buck, I dive after Frisbees.

“It’s over!” Roy shouted when I resurfaced, my sinuses burning, my nose streaming plumes of snot and water. “It’s over!” He’s funneled his hands around his mouth and simulated crowd noise, turning his body like an oscillating fan. “Ahhhhhh!” he said. “Ahhhhhh!” Althea, meanwhile, was paddling furiously towards me across the water, barking. She wanted the Frisbee.

Then Roy dropped his hands, stretched his arms, and pointed at me. “But seriously,” he said, as I caught my breath. “Awesome catch, dude.”

“Thanks,” I said, and I launched the Frisbee back at him, skimming low and fast across the water.

I know only a little of Roy’s past. And, of the little he’s told me, it’s impossible to know what he made up.

He’s thirty-four years old and from Green Bay: his father is a brain surgeon, and still lives and works there. Roy talks to him on the phone once a

week, in a quiet, reverent voice he never uses on me. They talk about baseball and home.

There are other things I know: he lived on a ranch in Montana for several years; he's spent a lot of time in Latin America, though he's never told me why; he walks with a limp, sometimes with a cane, and attributes this to "an accident," and he changes the subject so quickly that I've never asked him to elaborate on it.

I met him here, in Marquette. He moved here from Montana for graduate school. I met him in the program.

He tells me that he drummed with a metal band when he was younger, and he's forever slapping any flat surface he can find, keeping time with the music around him, on the radio, in his head. There's a poster hanging in his living room advertising an avant-garde movie he wrote and directed. He writes poetry that I like very much, which is what I mention when I'm defending him from people who don't understand, who snicker at his effusiveness and who stare at him, disbelieving, when he, say, flips Althea around and pretends that her butt is talking in a British accent ("Hello, sir!" Althea's butt usually says. "How are *you* today?").

I don't know what any of this adds up to.

He threw a Memorial Day picnic in his backyard, once, and, after a few beers told us this story: "I had this friend in Missoula," he said. He was leaning

against his garage, and the rest of us were spread around him, in chairs or on the lawn. “He was a good guy—a really good guy—and I loved him. But he started getting into hard drugs, and I started seeing less and less of him. Except when he wanted money. He’d come by the house at midnight, just shaking, strung out, and ask for a hundred bucks. I always told him to fuck off, but one night I’d had enough: he showed up, just a mess, shaking, and slobbering, and I gave him a hundred bucks—just to get rid of him!—and told him that if he didn’t pay me back, I’d never speak to him again.”

Then what, Roy?

“He OD’d. Later that night.” He paused. “So he never paid me back, of course. Never even got the chance.” He took a long drink from his bottle of Miller High Life. “So I didn’t go to his funeral.” He shook his head and frowned. “Fuck that dude.”

The picnic fell silent. I was sitting on the lawn, leaning back on my hands, my legs stretched out in front of me. I stared at my shoes, waiting.

And then Roy began laughing. “I’m just kidding, guys! None of that happened!” He laughed until he coughed, and then coughed, bent over, his hands on his knees, for a full minute. “But did you believe me?” he said, after a minute of coughing. “Were you convinced?”

I know so little about Roy’s past.

But this isn't the point.

"I was convinced," I said, my mouth open and my face fallen slack. "You always convince me."

Roy Buck will answer the phone pretending to cry. He will answer the phone with a British accent and call you his "mate". He will answer the phone in a growl, and ask, apropos of nothing, what you're wearing.

You will never, never know exactly what he's talking about.

Ten minutes ago, as I was revising a paragraph in this piece, my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a message from Roy. "I've been a bad boy," it read. "I think I might need a spanking." He might have learned his social-cues on the moon.

We were in the bar, once, at the top floor of Marquette's Landmark Hotel, sitting by the window overlooking Lake Superior. Roy was telling me about his day: woke up, drank coffee, rode bike, went home, took nap.

"Then I spent my afternoon reading in bed, cuddling with Althea." He took a sip from his whiskey, then opened his eyes wide, and shook his head hard. "I mean: but it was nothing sexual!" he said, setting his drink down to wave his hands in front of him. "We just cuddled!" I hid my head in my arm and laughed for five minutes. I don't remember if he laughed with me.

Another time, we were sitting at the L'Attitude, a sidewalk cafe, drinking bloody marys and looking out at the harbor. Roy was telling me about his last dog, Maxine. "She passed away last summer," he told me, so quietly I had to lean across the table. "It was devastating. I used to take her running at the beach every day. After she died, I sat by the water and cried for hours." He took a sip from his drink, and looked hard at me. "I didn't even want to go home at night. I spent too much time at the bar. I drank too much." He sighed and looked down at the table, his expression crumbling.

"I'm sorry," I said. I was fumbling for something to say. This seemed like a door into a more coherent friendship: we were connecting, Roy Buck and I. We were drinking bloody marys on a Sunday afternoon and speaking of meaningful things. As friends do! The muscles in my forehead tensed, and I felt flooded with remorse. "My cat died a few years ago." I said. I opened my mouth, closed it, opened it again. "It's really, really hard when a pet dies."

He nodded, waited a second, squinted out at the lake and said, "Dude, I'm so horny right now, I just want to get naked. I want to run down the sidewalk naked until I get arrested."

I blinked once, twice, and started laughing. "Yep," I said, still looking at the table. "Okay."

If Roy Buck were a painting, he would be of dogs playing poker. If he were a mode of transportation, he'd be an ostrich with a saddle. If you were to ask him his secret, he'd say that you should follow your impulses as far as they'll go, then farther still.

Which has gotten him into trouble, of course. He told me, once, about a women's studies course he took in Montana. Midway through a session, he raised his hand and asked the professor if he could leave early. "The WNBA finals are on," he said, "and I've got a lot of money riding on the game." The classroom remained silent. The professor didn't call on him again.

Another time, he brought a date to his apartment. She was standing in his living room, squinting at the glass cases of tropical insects that decorate his wall. This is when things began to fall apart. "She was already a little creeped out by the insect collection. You know? And then there was this crash from the other room: I don't know what it was! I think a plate fell in the sink, or something. I had a bunch of dirty dishes.

"And she jumped, and got real tense, and said, 'what was that?'" He started laughing a little: a rueful, staccato sound from the back of his throat. "And I told her it was probably the girl ties up in my attic, trying to escape." His laughter trickled quiet, and he sighed. "She left right after that."

"Huh," I said. "Well."

“Some people cannot take a joke,” he said. “And those people can just fuck off. You know?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding though we were talking on the phone. “I know.”

“Althea’s my best friend, dude,” he told me once, sitting on the beach after a game of catch. He circled his arms around her buried his face in her neck. “I’d throw myself in front of a semi for her,” he said, lifting up his head.

The point isn’t his past, which I know so little about; the point isn’t his skewed perspective, his surreal jokes, or the voice in his head that tells him he should clarify that he didn’t spend his afternoon having sex with his dog.

The point is the voicemails I woke up to every summer. “It’s a beautiful day,” he always said. “Let’s throw the Frisbee around!” I couldn’t find a summer job, and he rescued so many of my mornings, revived so many days I might have spent at home, in my pajamas, writing out budgets and worrying over money.

“Richard,” he told me, a few weeks before he left Marquette. “I just want to tell you that it’s been a blessing. I feel blessed having known you.”

Listen: my past is riddled with the graves of impulses I’ve been too timid to act on. There are girls I haven’t talked to, trips I haven’t taken, nights I’ve stayed at home because this process of meeting people, of getting to know them, of giving them a chance, has seemed so tiring, so exhausting and fruitless.

“Me, too,” I told Roy, slapping him on his back. “I’m glad I got to know you, too.”

But I don’t look back when I’m with Roy. The present is always too interesting. Truly: he was put on this Earth to wring something vivid from each moment, to explore its farthest reaches and come back with a full sense of its possibility. And he would love, love for you to join him.

When I hang out with Roy Buck, I dive after Frisbees.

Roy Buck doesn’t live in Marquette anymore. He earned his degree and moved to Mankato, Minnesota. He sends me text-messages, and writes, occasionally, a dirty or Dadaist email. “Richard, take me to Red Lobster again, sweetcheeks,” the last one read

I drove down to Mankato to help him unpack. After I got to town, he took me out for drinks at a bar downtown, and we sat outside, on the patio. Althea lay under the table while Roy and I talked about Marquette and toasted his future, which was bright, we both agreed. “I think I might get married here,” he said. “I’ve just got a good feeling.”

Behind us, someone started to shout.

“You fucking bitch!” the voice said. “You fucking bitch!” Roy and I turned around: behind us, on the sidewalk, a goateed man in a Dale Earnhardt

windbreaker was pacing in front of a woman sitting on a bench, waving his arms and pointing furiously. The woman was bent forward, looking at the sidewalk

“You think it’s okay to raise your daughter like this? To raise your daughter to be a fucking *whore*?” The woman raised her head to glare at the man.

Roy and I tensed, our conversation fading out.

“You’re a bitch! You’re a bitch!” The man said.

We look t the table, frowning.

“I’m gonna do something, dude,” he said. “I can’t listen to this guy anymore.” His voice hissed out at me through his teeth. “There is no way, no way she deserves that asshole.”

“I’m with you,” I said, and though I was drunk, I was. I was with him.

“Someone needs to stop this guy”.

We were perched on the edges of our chairs, drumming our fingers on the table, looking quickly around us, ready to stand up, ready to intervene, ready to jump up and save this woman when the cops showed up, yelled at the man to go home, while the woman shook her head at the sidewalk, embarrassed.

This is the point: I never used to dive after Frisbees, and I have never been in a fight. I can’t even recall a time when I’ve raised my voice at someone. I am not a good fighter. Whatever feelings such actions require have always eluded me.

But at that moment, I was ready, I was itching, to follow Roy into battle, to throw a punch if I had to, whatever it took help this woman. Even if it meant getting arrested; even if it meant spending the night in a jail in Mankato, Minnesota. It was the right thing to do. And if we got arrested, so what? Think of the story we'd have? And, you know, we could always just figure shit out tomorrow. There was nothing to worry about. No reason to hesitate. We always had tomorrow.

ONWARD

1.

In Whitefish Bay, we stop trusting our map.

“It’s a big dot!” Tyler says, leaning over the map of Lake Superior spread flat on the rusty hood of my ’93 Saturn. “Whitefish Bay is a big dot!” He taps his finger, once, twice, at its spot on the map: ten miles north of a town called Paradise (hardware store, gas station, fish and chip shop) in the Eastern half of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, at the end of a road that snakes through the woods and dead-ends on a tip of land jutting into Lake Superior.

It’s true: WHITEFISH BAY, says our map, next to a big, black dot. The same dot reserved for comparative metropolises like Houghton, Marquette, and even Duluth (population 85,000!).

I’d been looking forward to Whitefish Bay: I’d pictured a red-bricked downtown, a waterfront lined with trees. Somewhere to get a beer, maybe: somewhere with wooden floors, flannelled men, a pool table, a booth in the corner, its red vinyl reeking of smoke—

“These dots don’t mean anything,” he says, scratching at his beard. He pushes himself off of the car and looks across the parking lot, out at the lake: still and glassy tonight, an immense sheet of glass out to the horizon. He lifts his

arms to stretch: he's wearing his yellowed Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle t-shirt today. It's too small, and his belly pops out every time he raises his arms.

We're standing in the parking lot of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum in Whitefish Bay, Michigan. It is 8 PM and the museum, the only building here, is closed.

"So we need food, right?" I say to Tyler. This trip—our 1,500 mile jaunt around Lake Superior—is my idea. This is my car we're leaning against, it's my tent we've been sleeping in, and my faulty map we've been hunched over. "We need food, and we need to find a place to sleep." Tyler came with because he feels as attached to the lake as I do. He also, like me, had nothing better to do.

"You need food," says Tyler. "I've got still got a cooler-full of kippered beef." He stretches again, and his pushes his glasses up his nose. It's my cooler, too, full of my sardine sandwiches and Tyler's kippered beef sticks (two pounds of which he bought from Louie's Finer Meats in Cumberland, Wisconsin, on his way up to meet me in Duluth).

"Okay," I say. "We should drive back to Paradise. We should get me some food at the gas-station. I'm sick of sardine sandwiches. Then we should drive down one of those dirt roads off of the highway until we find a place to pitch a tent." I nod once. "Yeah."

“Okey-doke,” says Tyler. He looks across the parking lot, toward the lake. “But we should go look at the lake first. Right?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “Yeah.”

So we walk down to the lake, which is different here, an hour east of where we last looked: there are hills across the water, in what must be Canada (we’re almost in Canada!), a spray of sandy islands, and a concrete pier that brings us twenty feet into the water.

“Whitefish Bay!” I shout at the end of the pier. “The Graveyard of the Great Lakes!” Something about the nearness of the lake, the vastness of the water, makes me feel like a street-preacher. I want to shout something spiritual. I want to empty my chest of all of this feeling and leave it here.

“Yep,” says Tyler. “Yep.” And we lower ourselves to the concrete and stare at the lake for five minutes before standing up, walking to our car, heading south.

Two hours later, we’re sitting on the beach, ten minutes north of Paradise.

Tyler finds a rock in the sand and holds it against the horizon. “I wonder what makes us like one rock over another,” he says, throwing it into the water.

“I mean, they’re all just rocks.” The shoreline in this stretch of the Upper

Peninsula is undeveloped. Nothing but sand for miles in either direction, and we're the only people here.

"I don't know," I say, looking out at the lake. The sky is turning gray as the sun sets, and I wonder, absently, if there will be a storm. "What makes us write poetry? What makes us sing songs?" I find a rock, hold it up to the sky, throw it in the water.

After leaving Paradise, we headed north, toward Whitefish Bay, to find a place to camp. Tyler's GPS system led us to a dirt road off of the highway. "Turn left," said Tyler's GPS system, and we did: and the street grew narrower and narrower, and, three miles in, turned suddenly to sand sinking my Saturn. I pushed on the gas; my tires spit sand, digging us in farther.

Something was on our side, though. When we opened up the door, stepped outside, peeked under the car, we looked to our right to see, in a clearing in the trees, a group of tents, and a flock of shaggy people standing around a campfire. In the middle of the woods! In Paradise, Michigan! One of the shaggy people—a square shouldered, flannel-shirted woman of about forty—walked up to our car.

"I don't know," Tyler says now, digging in the sand for another rock.

"That's a good question. What makes us write poems?"

This is the second day of our trip. Yesterday, we left from Duluth and crossed Northern Wisconsin—a quaint, sunsoaked blur, in every town a used bookstore, a coffee shop, a Lutheran church —and into Michigan. We camped at the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula, a seventy-mile finger of land stuck in the middle of the lake.

“We probably write poems to get people to have sex with us,” I say.

On the road, the woman helped Tyler push, while I sat in the front seat and floored the gas. After five minutes, we were free, and decided to park our car next to the woman’s Chevy truck. “You really should have four-wheel drive if you’re going to drive out here,” she said, frowning at my Saturn.

“You’re right,” I said. Then, “Thank you!” and Tyler and I dragged our tent to the beach, where we pitched it twenty feet from the water.

Tyler’s nodding vigorously now. “Yeah! Some caveman was probably like, ‘whoa, if I make sounds that rhyme, girls want to have sex with me!’”. He picks up another rock, holds it against the sky, pitches it in the lake.

Tyler’s biding his time this summer. He spent last winter and spring in Antarctica, where he worked as a janitor at the U.S. base. This is Tyler: he was bored living in Wisconsin. He saw an advertisement. He applied. And then he was mopping floors in Antarctica. He’s going back in September, and, in the meantime, has nothing planned.

I'm enrolled in an MFA program in Marquette, Michigan. If you asked me about my future, I'd tell you that I someday envision myself working part-time as a cashier at a food co-op. But those jobs are hard to come by, I'd allow. So I can only hope...

"Look at this rock!" says Tyler, dropping it in my hand. And it is quite a rock: red, perfectly round, with veins of quartz spidering through it like cracks on a windshield. I toss it once, twice in my hand, then pass it back to Tyler.

"You should give it to some girl and see if she'll have sex with you," I say.

"Yeah," says Tyler. He looks at the horizon. "I wonder if those clouds mean a storm?" He points at the horizon.

"Nah," I say. "'Gray sky at night: it's not going to storm.'"

"Oh, okay," says Tyler.

The wind blew sheets of rain against our tent that night, and we did not sleep.

"We shouldn't have pitched the tent next to the water!" shouted Tyler over the roaring lake.

2.

Wawa, Ontario should be a happier place. I don't know what I expected: a water park, maybe, or a carnival ("Wawa"!), but not this shuttered, gray shell of a

town, with its packs of smoking teenagers and stoplights turning red and green over the empty streets, as if muttering to themselves.

We drive up, down, the main street, then go to a Subway perched off of the highway, where I decide to fall in love with the girl making my sandwich.

“We need a place to camp,” I say to her, as she’s piling spinach on my sandwich. “Where do people camp here?”

She pauses over the vegetable trays, turns her eyes up, towards the brim of her Subway hat, bites her lip. Then she smiles: a bright, wry smile. “Um,” she says, in a rubbery voice. “I live here, so I don’t ever really camp?” She is one of those people you meet, sometimes, in towns like Wawa—the sort of person who collects all of the dim light cast by her dreary surroundings and reflects it back a thousandfold. Someone who secretly suspects she was meant for larger a larger life than the Wawa Subway. “But I think there’s a campground a couple miles north, off of the highway?” She levels her eyes at me and smiles.

“Okay,” I say, lingering for a second, wavering at the counter, before sitting down with Tyler.

As I eat my sandwich, I try to picture her life here, in Wawa, 6,000 people, the largest town for two-hundred miles. I picture a boyfriend who works at the Tim Horton bagel shop, an apartment in the complex at the edge of town. I wonder what she does in her spare time.

“What if you *lived* here?” I say to Tyler, as he chews a bite of sandwich.

He shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know.”

We reflect on that bleak prospect—the jobs we’d have, the girlfriends or wives, the once-a-month shopping trips to Sault-Ste Marie-- for ten minutes, chewing our Subway in silence.

3.

In White River, we learn that Winnie the Pooh was a real bear.

We read this on a plaque in the Winnie the Pooh Museum. A Canadian soldier named Harry Coleburn trapped a bear cub in White River, then named it Winnie, after his hometown of Winnipeg.

“Winnie the Pooh was real!” I say to the girl behind the counter, a teenager with a curtain of black hair hanging limply to her shoulders. Behind her, a portable radio plays static: the sound fills up the room, and I wonder how she can stand it. “I had no idea!” She looks up from her *People Magazine*, doesn’t smile, looks back down.

Tyler’s standing outside, waiting for me to join him. When we parked outside of the museum, he said, “What a depressing town. I’m not going in there.”

I want to stay to read the other plaques, but Tyler is growing restless: I can see him pacing on the sidewalk.

“Let’s leave here, now,” he says when I walk outside, and we climb in my car and drive north.

“She was listening to static!” I tell him on the way out of town. “In White River, Ontario, the high school girls listen to static!” There’s a Winnie the Pooh statue off of the highway, to our left, and Tyler frowns at it.

“Just keep driving,” he says.

An hour later, our conversation stalls, and Tyler feeds a CD to my player.

“Have you ever heard of Mike Birbiglia?” he asks, and I shake my head. Tyler knows more about pop-culture and music than I do. I could never keep up.

Mike Birbiglia is a comedian, it turns out. “This is my favorite bit,” says Tyler, and turns up my stereo.

“I don’t want to have kids until I’m absolutely certain that nothing else good will happen to me,” says the comedian, and Tyler laughs.

“That makes so much sense to me!” he says, and slaps my dashboard.

“Me, too,” I say, nodding, though it occurs to me to wonder if this is a good thing. “Me, too.”

4.

In *Cold Comfort*, Duluth essayist Barton Sutter writes that he's decided that Lake Superior is God. "Any human view of God is bound to be imperfect, but, the way I see it, the image of Lake Superior is a lot less insulting to the Supreme Being than the more conventional picture of a gray-beard in bathrobe and sandals."

Tyler knows this book, too. We both completed our undergrads in Duluth, Minnesota, at the western tip of Lake Superior, and spent much our free time wandering along the lakeshore, talking about school, about girls, about our futures. I don't know that we ever solved anything, but we always left feeling a little lighter. It seems like God to us, too.

In Marathon, Ontario, two and a half hours past Wawa, the lakeshore is undeveloped and I park the car on an empty, potholed street at the edge of town. We get out, wade through a thick patch of scrub-brush, then slide down a steep hill to reach the beach. It's difficult, and we're not sure that we're supposed to be here. But we will see what the lake looks like from every town we pass through. This is our vow. We don't know what we're doing here, we never know what we're doing, not really, but we will be thorough: we will note that the rocks in Marathon are the size and shape of hockey pucks, and we will toss them in, one

by one; we will pull over just outside of Nipigon, at the northernmost tip of the lake, because it is, I'm pretty sure, the farthest north I've ever been; we will drive my car down rutted two track dirt trails when necessary, whatever path takes us closest to the lake, even if the path isn't meant for vehicles at all, even if the journey will render my car undriveable forever after. Used cars are cheap (right?). I'll find a job, I'll save up, I'll find myself a different car. We will see everything. We will be stupid and rash. If, while driving through the woods, we come across a muddy, car-sized puddle of questionable depth, I will floor my gas pedal and hope my car doesn't sink. If the road suddenly turns to sand and we get stuck, we'll push our way out. If we can't push our way out, there's sure to be someone to help us.

We'll be fine. We are young. We don't know where we're going, but this is how we prefer it. We'll be fine.

5.

In Grand Marais, Minnesota, Tyler and I stop for dinner at Sven and Ole's pizza. I don't have enough cash for pizza, but the menu includes a plate of pickled herring and crackers for five dollars. Grand Marais is a tiny place, about 1,300 people, a cluster of brick and clapboard buildings hugging a harbor along the bouldered coast. Like most towns along Minnesota's Lake Superior shore, it

swells with tourists in the summer, than empties out in the winter. Thus, its culture is dominated by two camps: the well-to-do families who make the five hour trip north from Minneapolis (and ensure that this tiny, isolated place is well-stocked with places to buy espresso, microbeers, artisan bread, endtables made of driftwood), and the people who live here year round—loggers, , charter fishermen, artists and storekeepers. These people, I suspect, ensure that the pizza restaurants have pickled herring on the menu.

The kid behind the counter—he can't be older than thirteen—blinks once, twice at me before repeating my order. "Okay," he says.

Tyler orders a piece of pizza, and we bring our food to the bar in the back—a dark-paneled, dimly lit enclave called The Pickled Herring Club.

"I wonder if they have any sour cream," I say, as we sit down.

Tyler looks up, holds my gaze for a couple of seconds, shakes his head. "Sour cream? For *what*?" He takes a bite of his pizza and furrows his brow.

"For the herring," I say, and spear a filet with my fork. One side of my plate is piled with chunks of herring; the other with Saltines. I drop it on a cracker and slide the whole thing into my mouth.

"Jesus Christ," says Tyler, or I think he says, his words mused by a mouthful of pizza. "This is how you eat herring." And he swallows, reaches across the table with his fork, takes one of my hearing fillets and replaces it with

my herring. “That’s how our ancestors ate herring,” he says. “And that’s how I eat herring.”

I suppose he’s right. Though our ancestors also started families before they were twenty. And attended church. And kept real jobs. And built houses. And pickled the herring that they caught.

I don’t mention any of this, though.

“You’re very authentic,” I say.

After pizza and herring, driving up the Gunflint Trail, a road that winds north of Grand Marais, Minnesota, cutting a narrow, path through the woods, and dead ends sixty miles from the lake. This road isn’t on the way to anything, but I remember coming here when I was a kid, and I want to see it again.

“This is a beautiful road,” I say, and Tyler nods in response. The sun is setting, and the pines trees tower and sway over the road, growing inches from the edge of the shoulder. And something about the drive—the waning light, the warm air, the sharp, piney smell blowing through my open window, the way the road dips and winds, cutting a serpentine tunnel through the woods—lends the inside of my car a hushed, haunted atmosphere.

Then Tyler leans forward and turns up the radio—his MP3 player is plugged into my stereo, and it’s playing dance music—throbbing, percussive,

lots of blips and robotic blurts. Tyler turns it up so the noise fills my car. Then a female voice, a monotone, humid, come-hither voice, starts chanting over the noise:

Sucking on my titties like you wanted me

Calling me, all the time like Blondie

Check out my Chrissy behind

It's fine all of the time

Like sex on the beaches

What else is in the teaches of peaches? Huh? What?

Tyler bursts out laughing and looks at me, expectantly. "It's Peaches!" he says. "She's from Canada. She's just filthy!"

"Okay," I say. "I'm not sure she fits with the vibe right now, though," I say.

"Bah," says Tyler. "Fine." He turns off his mp3 player, falls back in his seat, drums his hands against his thigh.

We drive in silence for ten, twenty minutes. The road keeps winding. I handle the curves with

"We should probably turn around soon," says Tyler. "Right? It's getting dark." We've decided to end our trip tonight. We'll drive to Duluth—two hours southwest of Grand Marais—where I'll sleep on a friend's couch, and Tyler will

drive south, back to Spring Valley, Wisconsin, where he's from, where he's staying with his parents until his next trip to Antarctica.

"Right," I say, leaning forward, peering up at the trees through the windshield. "We'll go a little farther, and we'll turn around," I say.

On the road to Duluth, it begins raining, and Tyler grows introspective.

"What are you going to do?" he asks, resting his head against the seat

I'm leaning forward, squinting, trying to see enough of the road through the fogging windshield and slanting rain.

"What are you talking about?" I say.

"Like when you're done with school?" he says, and puts his feet up on my dash. "What are going to do? Are you going to stay in Marquette?"

I don't answer him for a few seconds. "What are you going to do?" I say back.

"Oh, I don't know," he says. "Wander around more. Find a job." He pauses. "I'd like to go to the North Pole someday, I think." Another pause. "But what about you? Are you going to teach? Move somewhere? Have you thought about it?"

"I don't know," I say, and flip on his mp3 player. It's still Peaches. "Let's just listen to Peaches," I say. I turn the radio up, filling my car with shitty dance

music. "Let's not think about any of that." *Fuck the pain away*, chants Peaches.

Fuck the pain away.

"Okay," says Tyler, and falls back in his seat. And onward we go, onward through the rain and into the black enveloping night.

EATING LITTLE FISH

I can't help it: it is March in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and I haven't been able to linger in my shirtsleeves and stare at the harbor in months. I can't help pausing before I walk into Thill's Fish House, wavering on my feet, slumping against the doorframe and taking in this early, unseasonable spring.

I look out at Lake Superior: at the ore dock jutting into the harbor, flaking off rust, so enormous and out of place in Marquette's gentrified downtown that it might have fallen here from space; at the seagulls, scattered against the pale sky as though they were tossed there, like dice. I look at the water itself until I can't anymore, until my eyes dry up, until I need to shut them against the wind and sun. And when I shut my eyes, I listen—to the sharp cries of the circling gulls, to the steady whoosh of the downtown traffic, to a flag somewhere snapping taut in the wind.

Earlier today, I invited my friend Aubrey over for lunch. "Come to my house later," I said. "We'll eat fish!" Now, outside of Thill's, out in the bright afternoon, I'm rocking on my feet from anticipation: we'll crank open my windows, Aubrey and I, and let our hair blow around in the breeze. We'll talk about gardens and baseball, our words mushed between mouthfuls of herring,

and pretend that spring has won, that winter is dead, that we'll never have to shut our windows again.

"Excuse me," says a voice behind me. I turn around and see, staring hard at me, an old man, stout and flannelled, with gleaming, deeply set eyes the color of faded denim. He looks, as so many of Marquette's men look, exactly like Ernest Hemingway.

"I'm sorry," I say, and he flashes a quick, tight smile. I understand, his smile says. The afternoon is warm, and it is natural to linger outside, to stare at the harbor. I pull open the door and follow him inside.

And there, inside the shop, is the smell. Most of the fish at Thill's are gutted and filleted in the backroom, and the steam rises from the sinks in back, gathers the smell, and pours out to the front of the shop. If you could wring out this air, the stench would puddle on the linoleum floor and soak through your shoes.

But it doesn't matter: this is my favorite place in Marquette. I walk here at least twice a week, and leave with my arms full of fish: jars of pickled herring, slabs of whitefish wrapped in newspaper, fillets of smoked trout so salty they leave your tongue feeling wrung out, dead.

It thrills me to live here, in a town whose residents still look to their surroundings for sustenance, rather than driving their minivans to the nearest

Wal-Mart when they need groceries. And where people like this old man still walk to the fish shop, still furrow their brows and crouch to the floor to warily consider today's catch.

Though I'm not from here—have only lived here, in fact, for seven months—I feel at home in Marquette. And never more than when I'm standing in Thill's, breathing through my mouth, my head buzzing from this steamy rush of fishreek.

The old man stares and frowns for a minute more before looking up, hacking clear his throat, and saying, in a voice that sounds as though it should be coming from behind a podium, "How fresh are those walleye fillets, son?"

"Got 'em this morning," says the clerk, a thin, thirtyish man in brown overalls. He crosses his wrists behind his back and stares at the old man through heavy lidded eyes. If this clerk's hair weren't thinning, and if he weren't standing behind the counter at the fish house, I might mistake him for a bored seventh-grader.

"Very good," says the old man, nodding. He pauses, staring into the display case, before nodding again. "I'll take a pound."

While the clerk wraps up Hemingway's walleye, I crouch in front of the display case to consider my options. The salmon fillets, their rubied flesh bright as Easter eggs, are twelve dollars a pound, and shipped here from Washington,

anyway; and it would be very sad, I think, to leave Thill's with a package of fish that arrived in Michigan on an airplane. Which leaves the whitefish fillets—their skins gray, and shining so brilliantly in the florescent light that they look blue, almost holographic; the herring—smoked whole, ghastly, their eyes as bright and empty as marbles; and the smelt.

Smelt are tiny fish, no longer than my pinky, and there are hundreds of them piled in this display case. Next to the others, they look hapless: their scales intact, their heads lopped off, their tails drooping like surrender flags. If this were a zoo, I might feed them to a seal.

"Tell me about the smelt," I say to the clerk. The old man has gone home with his walleye, and I have the shop to myself.

"Well," he says, and looks up at the ceiling. We've talked before, this clerk and I, and he hovers over each word, chooses them as carefully as if he were carving them into a rock. "These ones are from Lake Michigan, actually. They catch them this time of year by deep-water trolling."

"But what do they taste like?" I ask. "Are they really fishy?" I'm thinking now of a story a friend told me once, about a party she attended at which everyone around her swallowed live goldfish and washed them down with pulls of tequila.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” says the clerk. “They’re good! Just fry them up in some oil.” He stops, looks at the floor, looks up again. “The old-timers go crazy for them. Eat them like French fries.” He raises his right hand to his mouth and pretends to bite a French fry, or a headless fish, in half.

I laugh, a little uncertainly, and stare at the smelt. I think about goldfish, their wriggling bodies sliding down the throats of whooping teenagers. I think about smelt, and think that I’ve never spent money on such a sad looking food.

My family has been eating little fish for generations. My mom’s side arrived here from Sweden a hundred-twenty years ago and brought with them Lutheranism, stoicism, and a love of oily fish. After settling in central Minnesota, my great-great grandparents survived the winter on buckets of pickled herring. Herring fillets were cheap at the local market, and soaking them in vinegar preserved them for months. My great-grandmother grew sick of it—the piercing smell, the sour, overflowing taste—but it was better than going hungry, so she managed.

My grandfather’s childhood is also full of herring, but his memories are fonder. “It was a treat,” he told me, “when my dad would bring home a jar of herring.” Of course, this was during the Depression, so his memory might be skewed. “We were probably excited to be eating at all.”

When my dad was seventeen, he worked for a year at Viking Herring and Lutefisk in Minneapolis. “Making the lutefisk was the worst,” he said. “They didn’t give us masks back then, and the lye would spray in our eyes. I had to go to the doctor three, four times that year.” This brush with blindness somehow didn’t rob him of his passion for little fish: he still flushes my mom from the kitchen with his pickled herring, its juices soaking through Saltines, through paper towels, riddling the counter with sour little puddles that he’ll need to wipe up later.

I acquired my family’s taste for oily fish very suddenly—lying in bed two months ago, staring at my ceiling and wanting, more than I’d wanted anything in a long time, a piece of herring on a Triscuit. It was a phantom pain, this feeling, a wanting like an absence, as though something vital had been scooped whole from my chest. I thought about Christmas Eve, about my dad perched over his jar, a fork in his hand, raising a chunk, dripping, up to his mouth, laughing as my nieces wrinkled their noses and skittered downstairs with their cell-phones.

What’s happening to me? I thought, trying to fall asleep. Something in my blood, something dormant in me has woken and rushed me back to my roots. I wished it weren’t so late. I wished I could call my dad.

I went to Thill’s the next morning. I’ve been a regular ever since.

But still: *smelt*. Herring, at least, is recognizable as food: cut into pieces, surrounded by onions and bay leaves and peppercorns, it looks like something a person could conceivably eat. A smelt, though, looks like bait that someone might use to catch other, better fish.

"I'll take a pound," I say to the clerk. "And," because I do not trust the smelt, and because I'm buying lunch for two, "a couple of smoked herring."

The clerk wraps the herring in parchment paper and dumps my smelt into a plastic grocery bag. "Enjoy!" he says, handing them to me across the counter.

"I'll do my best" I say, and walk out into the bright afternoon, the hollowed corpses of two herring tucked under my arm, a bag of headless fish swinging from my right hand. I am a Norse warrior, I think. I am a pillager of the sea.

In Marquette, I'm told, we do not believe in spring. We hear things, of course—we have friends downstate, relatives in Minneapolis and Madison, people who call us late in March and tell us, their voices as full as rain barrels, they they've seen tulips, brag about their brightening lawns and promising gardens. They ask us who we like in the Central Division this year, ask us if we want to come camping with them—if the weather keeps up, who knows: they might make it

out in a couple of weeks! We listen politely, we nod, we smile at their trilling voices, as clear as birdsong, but we don't believe a word.

In Marquette, spring is a trick: the sunny week in mid-March before the bracing, soppy snowstorms of early April. It deceives us, cajoles us into putting away our boots and dragging our lawnchairs out from the shed, before it cripples us again.

Or this is what my friends have told me. I'm new to Marquette, and haven't absorbed the native skepticism. Right now, out on the sidewalk, on this unseasonable day in early March, blinking and dazed with the other sunstruck locals running their afternoon errands, the idea of snow seems to me as remote as polar bears and volcanoes.

I grew up in central Minnesota, in the sprawling stripmallscapes that creeps northward from Minneapolis, up toward Saint Cloud. My parents tried to flee the encroaching ugliness, moving farther and farther north—from Minneapolis to Crystal, from Crystal to Maple Grove, and from Maple Grove to Big Lake, forty miles north of the city, where I grew up—but it caught up with them. Now even the woods behind their house—the dense, unbroken woods I used to wade through with my dad, entire afternoons spent tripping over roots, bloodying our arms against thornbushes, hopping over patches of itchweed and poison sumac—are scarred with housing developments.

Central Minnesota is a place with a beauty of its own, of course, but a beauty entombed beneath layers and layers of concrete. When you need a loaf of bread, you drive to the nearest Cub Foods; when you need a bottle of shampoo, you drive to the nearest Target. Nobody walks, because there aren't any sidewalks. And you cannot throw a brick without shattering the window of a Chipotle Burrito Shop.

So what a thrill to live in Marquette. What a thrill to walk past The Safety Store, to imagine myself someday needing an orange vest and a roll of caution tape, and then walking downtown, brimming with the knowledge that there is a place for me. What a thrill to walk past the vintage photography store and to consider that, in this outpost of 20,000 people, there is a market for sepia photographs and antique postcards. And Higgins' Bingo Supplies! When I walk by today, I press my face against the glass and stare at the stacks of bingo cards, the rows of daubers, the old woman paging through a magazine behind the counter, because I find it a source of wonder and gratitude to live near a store that deals solely in bingo supplies.

We are so much ourselves in Marquette. While other towns raze their Main Streets and build Super Wal-Marts out by the highway, our downtown remains unique and vital. It must be the isolation: we're an eight hour drive from any major metropolitan area, and a town set so deeply in the woods, so far

away from the rest of the world, must attract a particular sort of person.

Someone who wants only to be left alone, to let his beard grow long and crazy, to earn his living selling hardhats and yellow caution tape.

In the Upper Peninsula, we drift just outside the steady orbit of society. We will buy our fish from the fish-market and our bread from the bakery. We will help our neighbor shovel his driveway and jumpstart his car when mornings are cold. We are alone out here, together in the woods, and we will make the best of it.

Aubrey and I have been blessed, and we know it. So we walk lazily down the sidewalk, stepping deftly over potholes and hardened clumps of black snow, wringing all that we can from this afternoon. We ease past the hospital, past the university buzzing with students, talking slowly about the smelt we'll eat, the beer we'll drink, pausing to notice the shadows of bare trees waving on the sidewalk, the pools of reflected light in the potholes full of melted snow.

We're a few blocks from my house when we look up and see, standing suddenly in front of us, walking in the opposite direction, Ted and Veronica.

"Come eat smelt with us," I say. Come drink beer!" Veronica is on her way to work, but Ted's afternoon is free. He says goodbye to Veronica, turns around, and now there are three of us.

“I’ve never eaten smelt before,” Ted says, matching his stride to ours. We feel brave and expectant, like pioneers.

An hour earlier, after walking home and dropping the smelt in the kitchen sink, I turned on my computer to learn what I could about our lunch before leaving to fetch Aubrey. Smelt, I discover, were a staple for early New England settlers. Like herring, smelt are a small, oily fish that has never commanded a high price on the market. It is a food for lean winters, an abundant fish that’s easy to catch—smelt swim in large schools and are caught by wading into creeks at night, shining a headlamp into the water, and scooping them out with a net. If my ancestors had grown up in New England, they would have survived the winters on smelt and pickled beets, not herring soaking in buckets of vinegar.

“I don’t know if this’ll be any good,” I say now to Aubrey and Ted unlocking my front door, walking into my house. I’d left the windows open, and my kitchen is as fragrant and bright as a city park. “It really is just a bag of headless fish.” I hold it up, the soggy bag of corpses, for illustration.

Nobody seems to mind, though. I overturn the smelt into a pan with a lump of butter and grab each of us a beer.

“This is a good day,” says Ted, and we all sit down, stunned by our good fortune, as the room fills up with the odors of spring, butter and frying smelt.

We are so far away from our families, my friends and I. We are so far away from our hometowns. But right now, gathered around my kitchen table, leaning on our elbows, drinking our beer and talking through mouthfuls of fish, it doesn't matter.

"I just want a job," Aubrey is saying, chewing on a piece of smoked herring, "that doesn't drain me. That lets me go home at night with the energy to write."

We've built this moment ourselves: carved it from our lives the way, a hundred fifty years ago, loggers and miners and fishermen carved Marquette from the boundless, rocky woods. Or the way, thirty years later, my ancestors built a livelihood on the central Minnesota prairie.

"Or one that doesn't leave you feeling like an asshole when you get home at night," says Ted.

"And one," I say, holding a smelt, pointing it to emphasize my words, "that gives you enough money to pay your rent." I bite into it, drop its tail on my plate. "That's all I want! Enough money to pay my rent."

"It isn't too much to ask," says Aubrey.

"We want so little."

The smelt is better than I imagined, but it isn't good. In texture and taste, it reminds me of a school cafeteria fishstick.

Ted picks one up, stares avidly into it. “Check it out,” he says, and pulls from his smelt, stunningly whole, an entire little spine.

Aubrey shudders. “I’ve been eating my spines,” she says. “Is that okay?”

“Oh, no,” he says, grabbing another smelt, talking as he chews. “That spine is going to cut up all of your organs. It’s going to be really painful for you.” He shakes his head, rips out another spine.

“I’ve been eating my spines, too,” I say to Aubrey, and I have: I’ve eaten seven of them. I learned earlier that it’s customary to eat the spines.

I want you to see us here. I want you to picture us from above, from space, a dot on a map, and then zoom in, into the Upper Peninsula, this lonely jut of land arching out into the Great Lakes, and come farther in, into the forest, unbroken for hundreds of miles, and then into Marquette, and consider how strange it is that we live here, that *anyone* lives here, in this tiny, wooded, middle of nowhere, and come in closer, until you’re in my kitchen, closer, until you’re hovering overu my table, until you see us, all of us—Aubrey leaning back in her chair, closing her eyes against the sun, folding her hands on her floral-print dress as though she might start praying, Ted leaning forward, his elbows propped on the table, turning a smelt in his hands, one eye closed, as though he were approximating its value; me, looking out at the street, my hair waving around in the breeze, my eyes drooping shut—and think of how strange and miraculous it

is—Aubrey from Iowa, Ted from Chicago, me from Minnesota—that we've found each other here, that we're gathered together on this bright, breezy, impossibly warm afternoon, sitting around my table, united by this greasy, this ugly, this unremarkable fish.

HERE IS MARQUETTE

Young women of the Marquette Food Co-op, this paragraph is written in praise of you. So kind, so sane-seeming, all of you, with your sly smiles and artfully tangled hair; your unshakeable faith in the cleansing power of dandelion roots, and willingness to recite, when called upon, twelve different ways to prepare an eggplant; and your studs in your noses and lips that catch the florescent light and glow against your skin, like sparks. What would this town be without you.

Here is Sarah, watching me from behind the checkout counter, rocking on her feet with her wrists crossed behind her back. Sarah, tall and sharp-angled, with the mop of corkscrews hairstyle of Molly Ringwald or Jennifer Gray; who laughs easily in a rich voice, a melted-caramel voice, and wears the muted clothes of a Russian peasant girl. Who is always smiling from her perch behind the register, always swaying a little, her frock hanging loose on her body, her face pale and alive as candleflame. She leans forward now, still watching me, resting her palms on the counter as I approach with my armload of groceries. I feel light and looselimbed under her gaze: the transformative light of Sarah's regard! Then she springs upright, raises her right hand, peels a coil of hair from her face, and tucks it behind her ear. Because she wants to see me better. Because she really wants to take me in.

I set my groceries on the counter—banana, box of crackers, plastic tub of spreadable goat-cheese. This is my lunch. Then I raise my head and meet her eyes, which are greenish and gleaming. Maybe she feels transformed by my regard, too. Maybe maybe maybe.

Sarah!

“How’s your day?” I say, and she freezes, her hand hovering over my goat-cheese, her eyes widening, then emptying. She is turning her gaze inward; she is evaluating for me, scene-by-scene, her entire day. She sighs, slumps her shoulders, looks down at the floor; something like worry drifts across her face, and her hand still floats over my goat-cheese, as if to bless it. I look away from her as she thinks, look over at the protein bars stacked in the display rack adjacent to her counter—protein bars made of hemp; protein bars made of soy; protein bars made specifically for the body chemistry of a woman. I look over at the protein bars and think, this is a remarkable place, the Marquette Food Co-op.

Then I turn back to face her and she smiles, raises her head, pulls my goat-cheese across the scanner. Bloop, goes the register. “My day is good,” she says, reaching for the crackers. “It’s been a good day.” She nods. Bloop.

Sarah lives in a cabin on Lake Independence, twenty-five miles north of town. She’s been a cashier here for as long as I’ve lived in Marquette, and I have learned things about her as she’s scanned my groceries. She spends summer

afternoons picking thimbleberries with her grandmother. She owns a wooden rowboat. She lives in a cabin on Lake Independence.

And today, as pocket my change and stack my groceries into my backpack, as Sarah waves goodbye, as she tells me to enjoy myself while I walk away and shove my receipt in my back-pocket, I imagine spending a night in her cabin, sharing a quilt with her on a mildewed loveseat, watching *Casablanca* on a black and white television across the room. The wind blowing sheets of rain against the windows. A cup of tea resting on her lap, steaming and scenting the air around us (tea made of what? Of the rosehips and nettles we'd gathered earlier!); the bracelets on her knobby wrists jangling lightly like chimes when she takes a sip. And all around us the woods, the water, the enormous quiet of this place pushing us together, bestowing on us an intimacy impossible in a city (with its noise and flash, its perpetual promise of something better down the street, around the block, in a different neighborhood).

You never know. She might invite me over some night.

And today, as the door eases shut behind me, I turn around on the sidewalk and squint through the window facing out at Baraga Avenue. And there she is, looking out at me and smiling. She was hoping I'd turn around. She was hoping I'd smile back.

This town is so small. Nothing is impossible.

My Marquette is a tangled constellation of bars and coffee shops, bookstores and delis, libraries and beaches and sidewalk cafes, the points of which I bridge on a rattling and mechanically-unsound Schwinn roadbike that I love the way other people love their dogs. Every morning I wake up late and I ride my bike out of my apartment's potholed parking lot, out to Presque Isle Avenue (there are errands to run, part-time jobs to attend, books to read at tables outside of sidewalk cafes). Every morning I ride my bike down Presque Isle Avenue, towards downtown, and I go fast, because what is the point of owning a bicycle if not to go fast, past the Rice Paddy (where we order cheap takeout Thai), weaving deftly between cars, between SUV's with kayaks strapped to their roofs, imagining the astonished cries of drivers as I ease by them—but, but how can he be going so fast? What powerful thighs he must have!— my legs burning, my lungs full of the stinging air, fast, past the Wooden Nickel (where we drink Bud Light from mason jars), fast, because I am still young and want to prove it, past the Superior Dome, the world's largest wooden dome, where our college football team plays and which looks, when viewed from across the harbor, like a big, stupid tumor growing cheerfully amidst the trees and green of my leafy neighborhood (but which I love anyway, and in which I take a buzzing pride: can your town claim to possess the world's largest wooden dome? No, it cannot).

And on, past the BP, (where we buy potato chips when it is late and we are drunk because where else is there to go, there will be nothing else open) turning onto Third Street, past Valle's, where the pasta salad will make you sick, past Stucko's, where fratboys drink Pabst Blue Ribbon from goblets the size of fishbowls, slowing a little, pedaling harder, for Third Street runs up a hill, which I interpret as a challenge, onward, past Vango's and Togo's and White's and Blackrocks, all blurring by, my bike rattling, the wheels shuttering beneath me, and arriving, finally, at the top of the hill, where I'll pause for a moment, where I'll walk my bike to the sidewalk and peel strands of my sweatsoaked hair out of my eyes and mouth, breathing deeply, steadying myself, feeling the breeze pass through my shirt, cooling and drying my skin, before getting back on my bike and coasting down to Washington Avenue.

To downtown Marquette, all cobblestoned sidewalks and weirdly-specialized boutique stores (has your dauber run out of ink? Then visit, friend, Higgins Bingo Supplies, located at the 300 block of Washington). Downtown Marquette, where hand-holding couples clot the sidewalks, their faces sleepy and stunned slack by affection; where the trees look alive in the morning light and sway gently in the breeze, like old women doing calisthenics; where I'll chain my bicycle to a streetlight and walk on wobbly legs to Babycakes Muffin Company (the smell of sage and cinnamon, a table by the window looking out at

the old city hall), or Dead River Coffee (a free cup of coffee because I know the barista, an elderly dog asleep on the floor between tables), or the Marquette Food Co-op.

This is Marquette, where I will amount to something or not, and where I will fall in and out of love with a hundred young women in the service industry; where I will enjoy a leisurely sort of poverty and drink refill after free refill of Third Street Bagel coffee, supporting my ends of conversations about politics, about baseball, about music and poetry and the death of the novel (but is it really dead, maybe it's not dead, maybe we will write novels and keep it alive). Where I will spend a thousand mornings sitting on boulders, looking out at Lake Superior, following my imprecise thoughts all morning, until they trickle dry, until morning blurs into afternoon, because I have nothing better to do and because there is nothing, nothing urgent prodding me along. I have so much time ahead of me. I have my whole life ahead of me.

Here is Marquette. Here is where I live.

But is it always like this? No, it is not always this.

You have heard about our winters.

And it's true, all of it: they begin early, the end of October, and the portents are almost biblical—the sky loses its light, turns bruised and blue-black,

then drops over us like an overturned bucket; the leaves die at once, fall from the trees in sheets, and blow around our feet like confetti at a funeral. And then the snow. And they last, and last. A late May blizzard once shut down our airport. It has snowed in July.

Some of us are resourceful—our closets cluttered with snowshoes and cross-country skis, our smiles bright behind black thermal facemasks. But even the best of us grow tired by the end. Come February, we will have become paunchy and slow, our pale bodies sodden with boxed wine and potato-chip grease. And there will still be two months left.

So we endure: we ingest fistfuls of Vitamin D capsules because we are deficient, probably. We sit in front of full-spectrum florescent lights for thirty minutes each morning because we have been told that it will help. We take our sleep in ten hour increments, and pass entire days without ever changing from our pajama pants. And, sometimes, in a fit of clarity or self-consciousness, we will look in horror at our ruined lives and vow to change, now, to fill our time with worthy pursuits—we will practice guitar! We will jog! We will read novels written in Spanish!—only to forget these goals and engage in activities better suited to our lifestyles (we will host Nicolas Cage movie marathons. We will practice Wii Tennis until our high scores cannot be matched).

But we do endure, we do, and the weather does eventually turn—usually mid-May, sometimes sooner—which is the point. And when it finally happens, we stagger outside, all of us, all at once, wrung dry by the winter, our faces lined with pillow creases, our senses dull from disuse. We leave our living rooms and shamble down the sidewalk, blinking in the new sunlight, and we remember, again, how to notice. Those baskets of petunias hanging from the downtown streetlights. How thoughtful, we think, reaching out to give one of them a little push. And we look up and admire, even, the seagulls circling overhead, the seagulls that raid our garage cans and poop on our heads, extending our lunchtime errands, our walks to the bakery or bike shop or bank. And at night, we sit on benches next to people we like and watch the sun dip into the lake, the light spill and spread across the water—the air warm against our arms—our bare, unflanneled arms!—and we marvel at how lucky we are, left alone up here, the outside world reaching us but only as an echo. And it will flash in us, again, with the suddenness and clarity of revelation (as we look out at the orange water bleeding into the orange sky, as we think about the woods extending unbroken for hundreds of miles around us, as we stretch our arms to gently encircle the shoulders of those who sit near us on benches): that we are happy, yes, and that winter is long but it always passes, and look at what happens when it passes.

And then the sky will fade. The water will blacken. The insides of our skulls will become hushed and uncomplicated spaces, will feel as expansive as forest-clearings (starlings will flit between the limbs of the red pines swaying gently within our skulls!), and the heads of our bench-companions will rest lightly on our shoulders, their hair smelling like lilacs, or clover, or whatever, and we will breathe deeply so that the perfume enters our chest and pools in our blood and streams through our veins like a benign electrical current. And we will shut our eyes, and listen to the water will break gently against the rocks, and there will be nowhere else.

At Mattson Park, in the parking lot to my left, a mass of teenagers surrounding a running Ford Ranger. Some of them lounging against the hood, looking bored; others standing in dense little clusters, smoking cigarettes. And one more in the truck, revving the engine over and over again: va-rooom, rumblerumblerumble, va-rooom.

Oh, you stupid teenagers, all of you with such shitty cars: why are you so proud of the noise you make with your shitty cars?

But it doesn't matter. Today, I forgive even you.

I'm at a picnic table overlooking the marina. I have a book spread open in front of me, but I'm not reading it. To my right, some college-aged hippies

throwing a Frisbee. Look at how good they are: the Frisbees hanging against the pale sky for five, ten seconds, before dropping in the open arms of barefooted men wearing hemp necklaces, or women whose ponytails swing like pendulums as they run across the grass.

This town is small, it's true; it will not reinvent you, will not absorb and transform you the way a city can. You might arrive here, spend ten years, and leave exactly as you were when you came: only smaller, embittered, crippled by the long winters and unchanging faces. It's true.

In front of me, on the bikepath that runs along our harbor, a young woman wearing a sundress coasts by on a beachcruiser. Her hair streaming behind her, her eyes hidden behind a pink pair of plastic sunglasses. I feel a little bereft as she rides away, as if she snagged part of me when she passed and is trailing it behind her now like a kite. Where are you going, pretty bike riding girl. Come back.

Or don't. Summer is only beginning. I will see you again.

Marquette bestows its gifts only on those who are willing to notice. That girl who just rode by: I will see her again, I'm sure of it. Sipping a beer in a booth at the Landmark, or reading on a bench in Presque Isle Park. And I will smile when I see her, and she will look up and smile back (she will recognize me, too—she will have seen me around town), and I'll sit down with her and we'll talk.

And, just like that, this town will grow a little bit larger. That's the secret. That's all that you need to know.

Listen, I know, I know: summer is short, and winter is coming, and it will be brutal and it will be long. This is fine. Let it come. Let me grow old. I am taking what I need now, growing rich with everyone around me, out and enjoying ourselves in the bright afternoon. You cannot slow me, you peddlers of caution, you purveyors of pessimism. I will take and I will take and I will never run out.

WHAT CAUSES THE NORTHERN LIGHTS?

There were the Meskwaki Indians of southern Ontario who, when they saw the lights, imagined the spirits of their slain enemies flickering across the sky, furious in their ethereal impotence, aching for revenge. Or the Greenland Inuits who looked up at night—the boundless quiet of their winterlong night—and saw the dancing ghosts of stillborn children, transformed by death into energy and light. Or the Menominee of Wisconsin, who imagined giants stalking the unbroken woods surrounding them, spearing fish from rivers by the lights of their torches. Or the Makahs of Washington, who squinted towards Canada and envisioned a tribe of dwarves roaming the Pacific in canoes, snaring whales with their hands, then burning their blubber in beach-fires that shimmered red and blue against the horizon, like the holographic scales of salmon.

Most days, my world encompasses the ten blocks immediately south of my apartment. I ride my bike to school. I teach freshman how to cite scholarly journal articles according to MLA formatting standards. I sit at my desk and comment on essays until dark. And then I bike back to my apartment, where I'll eat a fried egg sandwich and spill its crumbs between the cushions of my recliner, where I'll plan tomorrow's class while drinking Carlos Rossi boxed cabernet out of a coffee mug, where I'll shut my eyes and fall asleep for an hour

before waking up and realizing that it's time for bed. Who knows what happens beyond this? Maybe dwarves are building fires. Maybe giants are spearing fish.

Tonight, though—October 24th, the start of our long, gray slide into winter—the northern lights are out, and so bright I can see them from my parking lot: a hazy blotch of red hanging over my apartment building, vibrant as an open wound, pulsing, growing brighter, and spreading cracks of light as if the sky is a spiderwebbing windshield. The northern lights are out, and my neighbors are all outside in their pajamas, out amongst the dumpsters and cars, silent with their mouths open and heads tilted skyward.

I want to get closer. I want a better view. So I walk towards the beach, down the middle of Hawley Avenue, staggering like a drunk or a toddler with my head turned up. I cross Lakeshore Boulevard, climb over the boulders that keep the lake from flooding the street, and lie on my back next to Lake Superior. The lake is black and silent tonight. The lake is silent while, overhead, a band of scarlet is ribboning like an incision into the sky. Someone is tearing a hole into the night and revealing the insides of things, the hidden mechanics of creation and life, and I have no idea what I'm seeing.

Though this will pass, I know. In an hour, the lights will fade and I'll walk home beneath an empty sky. And, tomorrow, there will be a new stack of bad

essays. There will be office hours. There will be takeout pad Thai for lunch, and a cold bikeride home in the dark. I know this.

I need to absorb what I can. Right now, I am shivering on my back, my head inches from the hushed water; overhead, the spirits of dead children are rippling across the sky to comfort the living, to shock us back to our senses, out of our heads and into our skin. I am alive, I finally remember, fanning out my hands to feel the cold sand against my fingers. I don't understand anything about anything, and I am alive.

THE BEGINNING GUITARIST'S GUIDE TO SEDUCTION

We are friends, you and me, we are friends, and we have been for months, or years, but it has lately occurred to me that should be More Than Friends. It is February. It is dark and cold, and you are lovely in a pale, sad-eyed, Emily Bronteish sort of way. I want to share a quilt with you on your sofa. I want to flip off the lights and fill your living room with candles. I want to hook my arm around your shoulder and watch our shadows ripple against the wall and let my head fall back against the cushion and listen to the wind make the walls groan.

But we are friends. And how do you say such things to your friends. And now it's a Saturday night, and we're in your basement, you and me, hiding from the wind and cold. I'm sitting sideways on your sofa, leaning back against the arm, and you're on the floor with your back to me and your legs folded beneath you. *Saturday Night Live* is playing on the television in front of you. *Saturday Night Live* is playing, and I'm trying to focus, but I can't, I can't, because the skits have all been so stupid tonight, and the musical guest is a woman wearing a pink beehive wig, and she's singing or lipsyncing tunelessly over a throbbing bassline—the sort of song my students would blare in their dormrooms before going out for the night, peering into mirrors, their mouths full of hairclips—and because I'm not giving it a fair shot, anyway, because I keep lowering my eyes

from the television, keep lowering my eyes so that they rest on you. And your head is tilted, so it's resting lightly on your shoulder. And your hands are spread flat on the floor behind you. And your shoulderblades are jutting sharply through your t-shirt, and they remind me of wings, and I wish that you would turn around, and I swear to you that we were made for a better and larger life than this.

We should star in a Victorian novel, you and me. Your face should be streaked with tears, and we should be standing in a moor. And it should be windy, and the sky should be churning and full of portent, and I should be gripping your shoulders with hands larger than mine and looking into your greengray eyes and peeling from your face a strand of rainsoaked black hair, and I should shout to you over the howling wind and hissing grass. I love you, I should say, and my jaw muscles would ripple as I watched my words land on you like blows. You are beautiful, I would say, and I would draw my courage from your eyes like water from a well, and in this way I would convince you that, yes, my Love Is True and my Passion a River that will Never Run Dry and you would throw your arms around my neck and bury your face in my shoulder and your hair would smell like clover and ohhhhhh, boy.

Instead, we're sitting in a basement, and there is florescent lighting and bad music and I can't even find the words to ask you to turn around.

And so I'm looking at the television, and then back at you, and now you seem to be receding from me, away from this basement and into the past, and now looking at you is like looking at a photograph: yellowed and washed-out, the edges curled, maybe I found it in an attic or basement or thrift store dresser drawer. There is that same ache blooming in my chest, right now, spreading inside of me and filling my limbs like silt, that same dread of time passing too quickly—she is old now, this girl, or she is dead, and I will never know her as lived then: her legs bent beneath her, her palms pressed flat on the floor, her hair soaking in the room's light and growing richer. I wonder what she was thinking then. I wonder how she filled her free time. I wonder how we would have gotten along. But it doesn't matter because she's gone—she lived, and she was beautiful, and now she's gone. And isn't time a prison. Isn't life sad.

Oh, but this is stupid. You are here. You are sitting right here.

"You see right through me," coos the pink-beehive woman, her voice bloodless, mechanical. "You see right through me, baby," she sings, and I would like to smash your television against the wall.

Instead, I look away from you and shut my eyes. I take a breath and open my eyes reach for the acoustic guitar leaning against the arm of your sofa. I don't know what I'm doing—I can't play the guitar, not really—but I set it on my lap and start strumming, anyway, plucking the strings softly, with my thumb. I

begin with C, looking at the neck, guiding my fingers into position, before switching to G, strumming a little louder, looking back at you, the strings digging into my thumb as I play, and I think, I force myself to think, I will think what I cannot say, keeping my head steady, my eyes locked on you, your hair shining in the ugly light, I think as clearly as I'm able, turn around, please, turn around, and just look at me.

Because the night is beginning to end, and I already know how it will go. You will rise from the floor and flip off the television; you will turn around, smile wearily at me, lift your arms towards the ceiling and shutter, your body rippling like a flag; you will bridge your hands over your head and hold your pose in the florescent light like a gymnast, like a medal winner; your shirt will be thin and will cling to your body and I will not want to look away but I will look away. The bones in your wrists will snap, one by one, like breaking twigs, and you'll drop your arms to your sides and say quietly, "I'm really tired," your voice warbling and low, your voice filling the room like incense as I zip up my jacket, as I meet and hold your eyes and tell you goodnight, again, as I look away and wonder why I'm always telling you goodnight, I don't ever want to tell you goodnight.

And I'll walk upstairs and let myself out of your house. And walk down the middle of the street, and it will not matter, because the streets will be empty.

And the wind will ease me along, and my breath will freeze and hang in front of me, will freeze and hang in tufts that catch the light of the streetlamps and seem to glow from within, as if lit by candles. Isn't that something, I'll think. Huh. And I'll stop, and shove my hands in my pockets, and think, this world is beautiful, sure, this world is beautiful, but what does any of it add up to.

Listen: I can already imagine myself old—I can see myself remembering tonight, wondering where you are, where our paths forked, how I managed to live so long while acquiring so little. And I don't know what to do about this but look at you now, to concentrate, still playing your guitar, switching to E, playing slower, louder, letting each note ring, down to A minor, just look at me, because I want you to meet me halfway, to help me bridge this gulf that's opening between us, because the world seems built to shove us along until we're dead, the world gives us nothing we don't take from it, and I can't bear to go home tonight without first taking as much as I can.

So let me play you a song. My voice will split like a teenager's, and my fingers will botch all of the chord changes. But I'll keep playing anyway, and trust you to understand, to step with me out of the current and arrive at a stop. And when I finish, we can sit for a moment and watch together, watch the night part and stream by us as swiftly, as benignly, as a river around a rock. It goes like this.

NO, NO, NOVEMBER

In November, your joints will stiffen and your hands will crack. Ask your roommate for hand cream: she keeps a bottle on her desk, and you're always looking for reasons to talk to her. She's on her bed with her legs folded beneath her, a Brit Lit textbook spread open on her lap. Of course, friend, she says, my hand cream is your hand cream and you know how I feel about Brit lit so I welcome the distraction. Lean against her doorway and massage the cream, which is purple and smells like lilacs, into your skin.

Talk about the wind. Say to her: listen to that wind. Point at her groaning, leaking window, at her lace curtains stirring in the breeze. She nods.

It's spooooooky, she says, arching her eyebrows. The gales of November.

Then she smiles and leans back, drawing her quilt up to her chin, stretching her legs so her socks pop free, as drowsy and limber as a cat. She looks up, pressing the top of her head against the wall, and squints at the ceiling fan. I don't want to read Chaucer, she says. I don't care about Chaucer. Would you read this Chaucer for me? And take my place in class? And take all of my tests? And graduate? And then walk for me in the commencement ceremony? She levels her head and looks at you, her eyes half-shut, the hair at the top of her head standing and waving at you like underwater plants. Would you?

Look at her: her hair bronzed and shining in the glare of her bedside lamp, her face lined with pillow creases, the skin beneath her eyes bruised and puffy-- she's been keeping late nights, you know, slogging through Chaucer and Beowulf and Bacon. She is all light and color: blurred and fuzzy, glowing and lemony and soft around the edges. She is a painting by Monet. *Young Woman Reading Canterbury Tales by Lamplight*.

And something is lurching in your stomach—there is a squirrel in your stomach—gnawing at your guts, rupturing arteries, tearing through nerves to build a nest, quivering in your chest. You want to break into song. You want to dance. You want to grab a notebook and plop down on the floor and compose for her a quick sonnet.

Say: That sounds fine. Though I'd need to borrow one of your sweaters.

Say: But I'm not nearly as pretty as you, so it might be hard to pull off.

Take a breath and read her face: sleepy, content, blank as a dinner plate.

Say: But I'll leave you to your Chaucer, and nudge yourself upright, out of her doorway.

She rolls her eyes. Oh, thanks. You know how I love my Chaucer.

Before you leave. Don't look at the floor: meet her eyes. Smile sadly.

And try, as you always try, to pack your smile full of meaning—with love, with

poetry, with the patient suffering of unrequited longing—and send it to her like a letter.

She smiles back crookedly, quizzically, and turns back to her book.

How could she not understand? She must be blind.

Pause in the hall outside her room and lean against the wall: you are echoey, suddenly empty, a room after a party. Sink onto the floor and stretch your legs across the hall. Stare at your socks.

You want so badly to be bold: to rise up and glide briskly into her room. To lift up her quilt and slide underneath, wrapping both of you up in her blankets. To hook your arm around her waist and pull draw yourself closer, to rest your head on her shoulder, filling yourself with her perfume—lilacs and spiced-tea and peach shampoo. To read *The Canterbury Tales* by lamplight until you both fall asleep, your fates merged and your bodies meshed, her bed a boat drifting slowly toward the far shore of your shared happiness.

But.

But this isn't something you can do.

Jesus Christ, stand up. Go to your room. Let her read her Chaucer.

You are a coward.

No, no, stop: you're not a *coward*. The timing was wrong, is all.

You are waiting for the right time.

You know what you're doing.

Walk to the park. Sit on a bench overlooking the lake and shut your eyes. You have the park, the world, to yourself. Stretch your legs sideways on the bench and lean against the arm. Let your head fall back; let the wind scour your face like steel wool. Hold your breath and listen: to the waves crashing over the break wall and splattering the pavement, at the flattened beer cans skittering by on the sidewalk, as though they're running errands.

The bench is cold and damp against your legs. Ignore this. Let the cold seep inside you, become a part of you. Try not to shiver.

Think to yourself: I am all alone in this world.

I am sitting on a bench in Antarctica.

I am an explorer on the moon.

Open your eyes: the lake is gray and turgid and roaring. The lake is alive. The seagulls are flying in place, like marionettes.

Look at the lighthouse, at its slow green light blinking methodically across the harbor. Think about shipwrecks. Consider learning the guitar.

You could write songs for her, sweet, jokey songs that would make her laugh, make her cover her mouth and look at her shoes. Oh, Richie, she'd say, her eyes full. I have something to tell you.

Shudder and shake your head: no, no, no, no, no. Stand up and blow into your hands, shove them into your coat pockets and start walking, quickly, scattering a flock of seagulls loitering on the sidewalk, hopping over a puddle left from the lake, quickly, to work out this tightening in your chest, this sinking in your stomach: you are twenty-two years old You are an adult!

You need to sit down with her, stare soberly at her from across a table. You need to say plain, earnest things to her.

And you will talk to her. You will talk to her tomorrow.

Say this out loud: I am going to talk to her tomorrow.

Walk faster so that you're trotting, panting, shivering. Say it louder, over the waves: I am going to talk to her tomorrow, I need to talk to her tomorrow, my god, I can't keep doing this, I need to talk to her tomorrow.

Wait for her to come home from her Chaucer class. Open a book. Read the first paragraph seven times. Close the book. Stand up. Squint out your window, at the cars whooshing by, at the stoplight swaying in the wind like a metronome.

Walk to the other side of your room. Look at your wall, at your poster of Johnny Cash giving the finger. Practice speaking in a level voice--a casual, throwaway voice:

Hey, so, I need to talk to you about something. Or, hey, do you have a minute?

Walk to the other side of your room. Look at your face reflected in the window, at the leaves clouding the air beneath the streetlights, swooping and circling like birds.

This is what you'll say:

Hey, so, I need your advice about something.

All-right, she'll say, her voice lilting and vowelly. She'll shift her weight and inch closer, closer to you on the rock, so that your thighs are touching: it'll be so cold by the lake. And this is part of it—the cold pulling you together, coaxing you toward an intimacy that'd be impossible indoors. The waves will break on the rocks, misting the air.

I'm not very good with advice, she'll say, but I'll try. She'll gulp her whiskey and tea and turn to face you; she'll raise her eyebrows and tilt her head. She is such a good listener.

You'll blow the steam rising from your mug, and look calmly out at the water. There'll be a ship, its lights glowing faintly in the distance.

Well, you'll say. There's this girl. And I've known her for a long time, and we've gotten to be good friends—very good friends—and I wouldn't trade this for anything, would saw my arm off before I'd lose her friendship. But the problem is-- you'll take a breath here--the problem is that I've fallen in love with her!

You'll take a drink from your tea, let the lemon and whiskey burn a trail down your throat and ignite in your stomach. You'll say: But I don't want it to get weird. You know how things can get weird.

And she'll narrow her eyes, bite her lip.

Walk to the other side of your room. Realize, suddenly, how cold you are. Curl your fingers into fists and let go—they're slow to straighten—they ache and creak, as though they need to be oiled. Sit down on your bed, and shove your hands under your thighs.

This is exactly how it will happen:

She'll narrow her eyes, bite her lip. Okay, she'll say. Go on.

So I don't know what to do! And here you'll turn to face her. She'll lean into you--your shoulders will be touching, her hair will blow into your face, and the steam from her tea will fog your glasses. You'll keep talking, brushing her hair from your eyes and tucking it behind her ear: I don't know if I should talk to her about it. Or if I should let it go. I don't want to wreck things, you know.

And you'll pause and look hard at her--you'll watch her eyebrows sink, her face soften. And slowly, slowly, it'll come to her. Wait, she'll say. Me?

You'll take a gulp from your tea, letting the whiskey linger in your mouth, stinging your gums and coating your teeth. You'll look away, look back at her.

Well, yeah, you'll say, because you are suave, and you'll circle your arm around her waist, dropping your hand to rest on her thigh.

This is exactly how it will happen.

Fall back on your bed, look at your ceiling, sit up.

This is not how it will happen.

Outside, a bus barrels by, rattling your windows.

She'll be home soon.

Remember your conversation last night with your friend, Nicole. You sat at opposite ends of the couch, watching cartoons.

Nicole, you said, during commercials, stretching out your legs so that your toes brushed against her sweatpants. You'd been drinking wine; you were feeling warm and wise. Tell me what you think of this idea, you said.

Tomorrow night, I'm going to drink a bunch of whiskey and confess to my roommate all of the profound things that I feel only for her.

Nicole didn't react, stared at the TV for a second longer, and slowly turned to face you. She was frowning, looking concerned. Her eyes traveled slowly across your face, as though she were reading subtitles.

Um, you said. Because the whiskey will help me speak more fluently. And because I can't keep feeling so impotent, can't keep resolving to talk to her,

can't keep not finding words, can't keep stuttering in her doorway and asking for hand cream, to borrow her stapler, what's she doing this weekend, how's her Chaucer homework coming. Because it is so exhausting, and so freshly disappointing, every fucking time. And because, Nicole, if it goes poorly, I can just say the next day, Oh, never mind all that stuff I said last night: it was the whiskey. You know how I get when I drink whiskey.

She kept staring at you, frowning, then shifted her gaze behind you, over your shoulder, at Bob Dylan taped to the wall and scowling over the end table. Her mouth dropped open, closed, fell open again.

That's probably a bad idea, she said, slowly. If you need to tell her these things, you should probably do it when you're sober. She squinted, met your eyes. Don't you think?

You shook your head and looked at your knees. No, you said. No, no, no, no, no.

When you hear your roommate come home and walk into her bedroom—her door groaning, her backpack sliding from her shoulders and hitting the floor with a whump—draw a deep breath and hold it, hold it, before you let it out.

Get down on your floor and lie on your back. Wait one minute, two minutes, and shout her name at your ceiling.

Rich-*ie*! she says back.

Funnel your hands around your mouth and say: We should make *hot-toddies!* And pour them into *travel-mugs!* And drive to the park and drink them by the *lake!*

She laughs, and something hot and charged streams through your legs and pools in your chest because it thrills you when you make her laugh, and who could blame her for laughing, for you are a funny, funny man.

Oh-*kay!* she shouts back.

Jump to your feet and steady yourself against the dresser; run downstairs and sock-slide to her bedroom. She's at her desk, her chin on her palm, staring avidly at her computer.

She glances at you, smiles. Just let me check my email, she says. I'll be quick.

Look at the corkboard over her desk. That button you gave her—with the drawing of the three pine trees, and *treesome* scrawled beneath it—it's still there--pinned at eye level, over her computer, where she can gaze at it and forget her work and be filled like a cup with thoughts of you.

Drum your fingers on her door. Say, I'll make the drinks, and wheel around, thumping downstairs toward the kitchen.

She's told you that she likes the Kinks, so play a Kinks album in the car. When you're stopped at a red light, turn to her and sing with the chorus--tighten

your right hand into a fist, hold it in front of you, shut your eyes, you are digging deep:

I'll take afternoon tea!

If you'll take it with me!

You take as long as you liiiiike,

Because I like you, girl.

She'll glance sideways at you and smile, humming along, turning back to the windshield, staring up at the moon—her eyes wide, her mouth hanging open, her breath freezing a circle on your windshield. The air from the defroster is blowing her hair into her face, and your hand is twitching, you want so badly to reach over and brush it from her eyes, but you know that you can't do that, at least not yet.

It's green, she says, nodding.

Shift into first gear and go, go, go.

Grip the steering wheel. Grip it hard, harder, until the skin around your knuckles is stretched taut and tearing.

Fucking *look* at her!

She's slumped forward, the seatbelt straining against her sweater, her arms folded on the dash, her chin on her arms. She's still staring upward, still humming, her mouth pressed tightly shut.

Just say something small, something casual and plain and true, something to open a door to something larger. Say to her: you look nice tonight. Or say to her: you look so peaceful, staring up at the moon. Or no, no, just say it, just dump it over her like a bucket of syrup, say to her, my god, I'm so in love with you, have been in love with you for so long, let's forget about the park, let's forget about Chaucer--let's leave this all behind. Let's drive to the mountains. Let's fell some trees and build a cabin. We'll sit by a fire, and I'll smoke a pipe, and you can knit socks, and we'll read novels set in England! My god, how have you not figured this out yet? I haven't been subtle. I baked cookies for you. I sat through *My Fair Lady* with you. I make dinner for you every fucking night.

I light *candles*! I fucking *light candles* for you!

Instead: straighten out your arms and shove yourself back into your seat. Let out a sigh--a long, slow sigh. Draw it out, shudder a little, wince: for you are an artist of sighs. Your sighs are a language, subtle and coded and varied.

Look at her: she hasn't moved, is still staring at the moon, her eyes wide, collecting its light like rainwater.

Her face is so placid, so calm; her face is a frozen creek covered in new snow. Maybe she's praying. Does she pray? Or maybe she's thinking of things to say to you, has been waiting so long, the words collecting in her like dead

leaves, and now she's alone with you, finally, and there's whiskey, and the moon is full—

She turns to face you, her cheek resting on her arm. What if there were dolphins in Lake Superior? she says. Wouldn't that be something?

Blink. Nod, once, twice, again. Say to her: that would be something.

Look at the road.

She will never be in love with you.

Drive to the park. Get out of the car and walk to the shore with your chin on your travel mug, the steam wetting your face, stinging your eyes. She is clumsy—grab her elbow and steady her while she steps around the rocks. I'm sorry, she says. I'm such a klutz.

Imagine that this means something, you holding onto her arm by the lake.

Let go.

Find a rock large enough to sit on. Sit and stare sleepily at the lighthouse.

Ask her about Chaucer, about her day, about her plans for the future. These are the things you talk about when you're sitting by the lake.

Look at her: her chin propped on her knees, her face bleached white by the moon. Listen to the waves lashing the shore, at the foghorn lowing across the harbor like an animal.

I don't have plans for the future, she says. I barely have plans for next week.

And keep looking at her, until something bends and snaps inside of you, until you want to cry out because she's receding from you, as if on a conveyer, because you know that you will never drop your hand to rest on her thigh and that you will never drift asleep in her bed.

Keep looking at her until she turns to face you, then shift your gaze away, to the left, to the lighthouse. You were only looking at the lighthouse.

**ON BEING STOPPED BY A PLANNED PARENTHOOD VOLUNTEER IN
CHICAGO'S WICKER PARK NEIGHBORHOOD ON MARCH 2ND, 2010**

I didn't want to stop. I didn't want to speak to you. I tried to breeze past, to skirt around you on the sidewalk and into the shade cast by the awning of the discount mattress store, and onward, down Milwaukee to Reckless Records. I didn't want to join a mailing list. I didn't want you to solicit money from me. I didn't want to have to tell you *no*. I didn't want to take a pamphlet, or sign a petition, or tell my friends how they could help. I didn't want to stop. See: it was my third day in Chicago, my third day away from Marquette. Spring Break 2010! And I had reserved the day for record shopping. I was giddy with momentum, with a sense of direction, and you were slowing me down.

Okay, okay. Why record shopping?

Because: there are no record stores in Marquette. Because I am the sort of person who will sit you down and speak lengthily about how much better vinyl sounds, saying vague and unscientific things about the "warm sound" compared to CDs or Mp3s. I will speak about the singular pleasure that comes from sitting cross-legged on the floor, a gatefold record sleeve open on your lap, listening to a new album for the first time. In my wallet, I had a list of records. I wanted to bring back a piece of Chicago with me. And I also wanted to impress a girl.

Which is why you do most things, right? To impress girls?

I believe this is why I do most things, yes.

But how does one impress a girl with records?

Because this girl appreciates vinyl, too. This girl sits up in her bed and shuts her eyes and listens to Nick Drake records as she falls asleep. And so: I would visit Reckless Records. I would purchase records for myself, and I would find a record for her, too, which I would present to her in a sealed Reckless Records bag. And she would be so moved by my kindness and ingenuity that she would invite me into her bed and remove her clothes.

What record would you purchase for her?

I would purchase for her a Kate Bush record. Because this girl was prone to monthlong fits of leaden sadness; this girl enjoyed walking near the gray, churning lake in November because the seascape matched her mood; this girl was a writer of poetry. I figured she should own a record by the British art-pop singer, Kate Bush.

Is this really how you think intimacy works? That you impress people with your taste in music and then they invite you into their beds?

I don't know. No. Yes.

Ha!

But, but: I was staying in Logan Square with my friend, Ted. I woke up after he went to work, and I found directions to Reckless Records on his laptop. I

scrawled them on my wrist and off I went. I knew exactly where I was going: direction, momentum. I walked quickly down his street, Drake Avenue, the sidewalks still wet with dew and snowmelt, the sunlight thin, strained through the high treetops of Ted's neighborhood. Down Drake, past the house with ducks bopping around in a fenced-in yard—someone in Ted's neighborhood bought two ducks, clipped their wings, and keeps them as pets-- and I spoke to the ducks as I breezed past, the air chilling my face—Hey, ducks!" I said—because I was in a good mood. I was going to Wicker Park—1532 North Milwaukee Avenue, said my wrist. I would explore the neighborhood: I would traverse sidestreets and press my face against the windows of consignment shops; I would find a place to eat falafel, maybe, or a burrito—I was astonished by the abundance of the city, how you could go to any neighborhood and walk blindly for three minutes and find someone to sell you a burrito so large you could use it as a pillow. I would walk until I had a sense of things, until I'd formed an internal imprint that I could bring back with me to Marquette. I longed for stimulus; the winter had been so cold, so dark. And I would shop for records. So I walked on, through Ted's neighborhood, turning right on Diversey, an ugly street with a bombed-out feel, no trees, stripmalls and cigarette butts and decayed sidewalks, past Best Subs #2 and Maria's Unisex and Dunkin' Doughnuts, turning right on Milwaukee, past McDonalds and Café Con Leche

and the grocery store with cardboard boxes full of browning bananas and oranges shrink-wrapped in Styrofoam containers lined up outside the door. It was already pushing forty degrees. I didn't recognize anyone I saw on the sidewalk. The people smoking at bus-stops spoke Spanish. I felt so far away. I felt in love.

The city can do this to you. The city can make you feel new.

Yes, and I walked down the subway stairs and fed my CTA pass into the machine and walked easily through the turnstyle, and there was a train pulling in—my train—and so I sprinted up to one of the cars as it slowed, and the doors hissed open, and the platform was dark and wet and smelled like urine, but I would romanticize even that—the pungent humanity of the subway platform! And I stood on the train for ten minutes, swaying with the bumps and stops so I wouldn't fall down—it was like riding a bull, you couldn't fight it if you wanted to stay on—and the train rose, out of the ground and into the sunlight like a dolphin arcing out of the ocean, and then my stop, the hissing doors, and I bounded off the train and into the morning with the grace and alacrity of someone who knows where he's going, who is running an errand of love, who understands the intricacies of the CTA. I longed for someone to stop and ask me directions. And then down the stairs, through the turnstyle, out onto the street—I found Milwaukee at the intersection, and sprinted to beat the crosswalk light, and there you were. And I stopped. Though I didn't want to stop.

So why did you?

Because you were pretty in that frowsy, knit-capped, Frisbee-playing way that reminded me of every girl I ever thought I loved as an undergrad. Because your eyes—incisive and beseeching and halfshut—were a swimming pool that I tripped into.. Because you were holding your clipboard tightly against your chest as if it were keeping you rooted to the sidewalk, keeping you from floating away into the pale sky. Because you said, “Excuse me?” in a cracked voice that had grown accustomed to defeat. Because the air was clear and bright, the temperature was hurtling towards fifty degrees, and how could I disappoint you on a day like this? Because I looked up and saw you and wanted, suddenly, to write something beautiful into my morning. Because, if I stopped, and listened to you recite your speech, and nodded in a thoughtful way, I would impress you with my commitment to progressive causes, and then maybe—maybe!—we would join forces, you and me, you would drop your clipboard and hook your arm in mine; we would hop the train downtown and wander the city, through the shadows cast by skyscrapers, wander until the sun set, until the streetlamps flickered on, until the air turned cold and the wind cut sharply through our clothes. And you would lean against my arm as we walked, the warmth of your body seeping through my coatsleeve; you would murmur into my ear—telling

me about your life—your life as a Planned Parenthood volunteer—your chin resting on my shoulder, your breath condensating and cooling on my temple—

Stop. Stop! That's so stupid. All of that's so stupid. We were strangers—we had never seen each other before—and I wanted you to sign a petition and make a donation. I didn't want to lean against your arm and tell you secrets. I wanted your signature. I wanted your money.

But don't cheapen it. There was more to it than that. I *know* it. I looked to my left and met your eyes and eased from the flow of sidewalk traffic, slowed to a stop in front of you, never breaking eye-contact. I smiled, and shoved my hands into my pockets, and rocked backward on my heels. And do you remember what you said?

No!

You burrowed your chin into your neck, took a breath, and looked back up at me. And then you said, in that same cracked voice, *You stopped*. That's what you said. And took another breath, looked back at the sidewalk. *Thank you so much for stopping*, you said.

Most people ignore me. I was glad you stopped. I thought you might give me your debit card number.

And right then, I felt requited. I felt less alone.

I'd already talked to a hundred other people that afternoon. I doubt they felt this same connection. I doubt they're rhapsodizing about it in an essay right now.

But it doesn't matter. *I did, and I am.* And you can tell me it was meaningless, but it wasn't. Listen: after I stopped, I told you, right away, that I didn't have any money (I'd already been accosted twice during my trip—two bearded guys downtown, both working for Greenpeace, who were friendly until I told them I was too poor to help—and I knew the drill). I apologized, told you I didn't have any money, and shrugged. Do you remember?

What about the girl—

And you didn't blow me off like the Greenpeace guys did. You sighed, nodded, said okay, and kept looking at me. I understand, you said, and shrugged. We stood there for two, three seconds. Then you asked where I was from. You could have moved on, you could have sent me away, but you asked me where I was from.

You were going to buy a record—

You asked me where I was from, and I told you *Marquette*. You shook your head, slowly, once. Your face blank. I said, *Michigan, in the Upper Peninsula*, and I held my palm sideways, and pointed at the base of my index finger because in Michigan our palms double as maps. Your face didn't ripple. *It's*

small, I explained, letting my hand fall to my side. We were anchored in the middle of the sidewalk, you and me, and all of the briskwalking city people—boys in skinny jeans staring seriously into their smart-phones, women wearing high heels and scarves, everyone looking very serious and late for something--parted and streamed around us. But they all fell away. These people were extras. These people were furniture.

Oh, good lord—

Then you asked why I was in Chicago. I told you, *for fun*. I told you, *for no particular reason*. And then I asked you, *what should I do while I'm here? What do tourists do when they're in Chicago?*

Oh, boy. And what did I say?

You smiled, and widened your eyes, and clapped your gloved hand against your thigh. Thwap. Like that. And then shoved your clipboard under your arm, and reached into your jacket pocket, and pulled out a smart-phone. *Are you into museums?* you asked, peeling the glove from your right hand, shoving it under your arm with the clipboard. You began pecking at your phone with an extended finger. *You know, you said, like dinosaurs and stuff? Fossils? That kind of museum?* A band of sweatsoaked hair clung to the side of your face; it was too warm for a wool cap. I wanted to peel it away. *Sure!* I said. *I like dinosaurs!* *Well, you said, handing me your clipboard (hold this, would you?). Well. Then you*

should visit the Field Museum, downtown. It's by the lake. Let me pull up an address,
you said, still pecking at your phone.

It's true. I always tell people to go to the Field Museum.

And you sidled up next to me, brushing against my shoulder, and you angled your phone so I could see it and said, *it's easy: take the Orange Line to Roosevelt. Do you know the trains?* And I nodded triumphantly. *And then just walk a few blocks towards the lake. You can't miss it.* You looked up at me, squinting. *Should I write this down?* you said. And didn't let me answer—you took back your clipboard, shoved your phone back in your pocket, pulled out a pen, and started writing, furiously, on the petition. *Here,* you said, tearing a corner from the paper and pressing it into my palm like a lovenote. *You should go!* you said, and smiled a little sadly, I thought. And I said I would. I stood there for a second. *Thank you,* I said, and shrugged. A few seconds passed. I waved and let my hand drop against my thigh before walking away.

And that's it?

No. *Hey!* you said, and I wheeled around. Your clipboard held against your chest; your chin perched lightly on top of it. *Do you have a sister?* you asked. *Named Nora? In California?* I stepped closer. *What?* I said. You shrugged. *You look like someone named Nora. And you remind me of her. You guys are doppelgangers.* I shook my head and stood there. *No,* I said. *I'm sorry.* And shrugged again. And

held your gaze for a moment, wishing I knew Nora from California, wishing that the three of us—you, me, her—could link our arms and march through Berkley or Santa Cruz and protest the policies of our Republican-controlled House of Representatives. I wished I had a reason to keep standing on the sidewalk with you. But I didn't. So I stood there for one more second, thinking of how I would write this out later. I said *goodbye*. You said *goodbye, have a beautiful time*. And that was it.

What then?

After I left you? Nothing. I ate some falafel. I found the record I wanted. I rode a train to a coffee shop and sat there until dark.

Then why do you remember me so well? Why do I matter?

Because. I was so tired when I arrived in Chicago. It had such a long winter in Marquette. I was tired of sitting in my apartment, hiding from the cold. Tired of recognizing every face I saw—I had all of Marquette's faces memorized! I felt frozen over and stuck. And then I met you. And we connected for a few minutes. And I felt better, somehow. Things could change. Maybe. Nothing was hopeless. I felt better.

But we *didn't* connect. I solicited you for a check and signature; we said hello, we exchanged pleasantries, we said goodbye. You have no idea what intimacy is. You do not begin lasting romances by smiling at women on

sidewalks. You will not get invited into anyone's bed because you bought her a Kate Bush record.

Okay. Okay. But why can't I pretend? Why can't I remember you how I want? Why can't I shape my unremarkable life into lyrical little stanzas? Why can't I read my memories like a poem, looking closely until they reveal something beautiful?

You can, of course. But what's the point?

To give my life meaning. To feel less alone.

But do you really believe that? Do you really believe that our meant anything? Do you think that I remember you? That our encounter was anything more to me than a failed sales-call?

Yes. No. I don't know.

But you want it to be. And so you imagine. And bump sleepily around in your little town—like the ducks in your friend's neighborhood. You are a duck with clipped wings!—dreaming about the people around you and wondering what it might be like to know them better. And then you write it all down, hoping that it means something, somehow, hoping that it'll make a difference. But it is so much harder than this to know someone. It is difficult. It is bewildering. It is easier to write fantasy stories about the young woman you sometimes see at the coffee shop, about the young woman who sells you

groceries, about the young woman holding a clipboard in a city four-hundred miles away.

But maybe I can connect with the world around me with my essays.

Maybe people will read them and understand me. Maybe something will change.

But what? What will happen if you write essays? How will things change?

I could get them published.

You could get them published! And then women the worldround would read them, would flock to Marquette and kick down your office door and say, Ohhhhhhh, Richard Hackler. We have read your work in the *Western Tennessee Review of Creative Nonfiction* and we have seen that you write in a lyrical way. We have come to rescue you from a life spent alone. We will let you sleep in our beds.

But—

Whatever happened with your poetic girl prone to fits of sadness? Did you find her a Kate Bush record?

Yes. I gave it to her the next weekend. It was her birthday.

And then what?

Nothing. I kept trying. I courted her in a precise, distant way. With minimal risk, like a drone dropping missiles. I wrote her letters. I made her mix-cds.

And—

And, nothing.

And the cashier with the cabin Big Bay? Or your old roommate? Or the girl who recognized the Regina Spektor song at Babycakes?

No, but I wrote about them, all of them. And that has to count for something. I need that to count for something.

It doesn't. Listen to me. It is a good exercise, maybe, sitting in front of your laptop, analyzing your everyday—your trips to the grocery store, your bikerides across town, your encounters with Planned Parenthood volunteers—until it seems heroic, or beautiful, or grand. Maybe it will make you more attentive. Maybe you grow more appreciative of the world around you. But—are you listening?—it is not the same as living. It is not enough to smile at people, to flinch when they smile back, and then to retreat to your office to record the whole exchange. You are not living. You are writing. You are writing. You are alone in your office. You are writing.

THREE

IT'S A LONELY WORLD

It's Saturday night in Marquette, Michigan, and Cynthia and I are in Harley's Lounge, waiting for Rusty Borealis to start playing. Cynthia's sitting to my right, spinning on her stool with her elbows on the bar; her left elbow is resting on a closed copy of Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Senses*, which she was reading before I showed up: now she's squinting at the bottles of liquor lined behind the bar, pivoting back and forth on her stool while her elbows hold her visible half in place.

Cynthia's a student in an MFA program here, and this is how we met. I moved here from Duluth, Minnesota, ten months ago—a week after my sister died—to enter the same program, and we ended up sharing an office.

We're sitting in silence at the bar, sipping our gin and tonics, slowly getting drunk. We're sitting in silence because we know each other so well, and because we've already recounted our days: Cynthia slept late and spent the rest of her day watching reruns of the 1980's police drama, *21 Jump Street*. I bought a bunch of spinach at the farmer's market, ate a box of Triscuits, and took a nap. It's June. School's been out for a month. These are our lives.

And so I'm spinning on my stool, watching Carrie make a whiskey sour at the other end of the bar. It's still slow in Harley's tonight—at least another hour

before the music starts—and she’s taking her time: holding the bottle of Canadian Hunter in her right hand, looking down at the floor, her brown hair reaching limply down to her shoulders. She’s a little older I am, in her mid-thirties, maybe, with pale, watery eyes, and some leaden internal exhaustion that tugs down at her smile, makes her seem always on the verge of sighing and slumping her shoulders and going to bed for a very long time. She’s moving her lips, now, reciting something to herself, her face empty, while a young man with a Charles Manson beard and a rainbow knit-cap stands at the other side of the bar, smiling up at the ceiling, smiling up at nothing, waiting for his drink.

“Hey,” says Cynthia, and I shake my head clear, look over at her. She scoops up a handful of popcorn from a paper tub sitting between us. “Maybe Mae will show up tonight.” She snares a piece of popcorn from her flattened palm, spins it in her fingers, then flips it in her mouth.

“Maybe,” I say. And I think of the last time I saw Mae Cupwell, the singer-songwriter, the woman-about-town: playing in a basement at a house party across town. She sat on a stool in the corner, lit only by the Christmas lights strung along the wall behind her. We crowded around her, all of us, twenty flannelled art and English students sitting with our legs crossed beneath us on the floor. We sat silent on the damp concrete, our faces rapt and still, resting our chins on cans of PBR that we held cusped in our hands. And she rocked back and

forth as she strummed her guitar—C to A minor, and back again, over and over—roving her halfshut eyes over us, the blues and greens of the Christmas lights dappling her face like paint, and then singing, closing her eyes, filling the beersmelling room with her voice: high and sharp one moment, then falling, suddenly, to its knees, down to a smokestained murmur, stretching taut and snapping loose again like a rubber-band.

I listened to Mae Cupwell sing and let my thoughts grow expansive. I imagined the world around me, imagined it spreading from just outside, this neighborhood of big, boxy student houses, then panning outward, to Marquette, so ugly in March, a clump of brick buildings and bare trees hugging the gray lake, then outward, farther, Michigan, North America, the world—so vast and lonely and incomprehensible--but look at us in this basement, coming together over something beautiful. Look at us all, drinking our bad beer while this young woman whisks us away to someplace better.

This is what I think of when Cynthia mentions Mae. But I shake my head, shake all of it away, and raise my eyes to look at Cynthia smiling over at me, her eyes bright, gathering and concentrating the room's dim light and then sending it back at me. She tucks a shock of hair behind her ear and keeps smiling. "Mae usually shows up to these shows," I say.

“Yeah,” she says, then lifts up her right hand. Cynthia was my first friend in this town. She lifts her hand and tilts the rest of the popcorn into her mouth.

“Maybe you guys will make out,” she says through her popcorn. And then laughs—a silent, closed-mouth laugh—and I smile and turn away from her and blow at my drink sitting in front of me and watch the gin ripple out like water in a pond.

“She has a boyfriend,” I say to my gin, my smile diluting a little. “So that probably can’t happen.” Though tonight is one of those breezy, cool early summer nights that only occur here in early June, the sort that makes you feel lighter and younger than you are, that instills in you a keen and vague yearning—for what? I don’t know. For some sort of communion. Some shared recognition of the evening’s beauty and transience—a yearning that seems destined to be fulfilled, somehow; the sort of evening that makes your blood feel charged, as if your heart were pumping out a mild tea. The sort that draws you out of your house—stifling tonight, too messy, too warm—and into the twilight, that pushes drifting like a dust-mote down the sunspackled sidewalk. And you will wander tonight—to the lake, maybe, to look out at the blackening water, or through the cemetery, pausing on the bridge crossing the pond to look at the ducks clotting the water’s surface as thickly as lily pads. And you’ll lean against a streetlight on a night like this, your hair blowing around in the wet breeze, and

shut your eyes to imagine, spread broadly before you, your vast, untilled summer. Anything could happen! And it would be, I think now, tapping my foot rapidly against the bar, looking over at Cynthia looking over at me, looking down at the bar, blowing again into my gin, it *would* be nice to walk outside after the show, to fill my lungs with the fragrant air, to hook my arm around Mae Cupwell's waist, to walk with her down Washington Avenue, through downtown, beneath the trees shimmering in the streetlight, to walk down to the lake, to sink with her to the cooling sand, to memorize the weight and feel of her head resting on my shoulder, to lose my hand in her thick black hair which probably smells good, which probably smells like some sort of flower and then—sure!—to make out.

I think of her face, as pale and searching as a spotlight, and wince.

"Boyfriends don't matter," Cynthia says, her voice full of gin. "Boyfriends don't mean anything."

Behind us, beneath a television playing a Tigers game, our friends Ted and Andrew—sole members of the rock and roll band Rusty Borealis—are setting up for their show: plugging in amps, tuning guitars, and mumbling—check, check—into their microphones.

"No." I say to Cynthia. "No, no, no." And I shake it all from my head. Mae. The beach. Everything.

Let's focus on this gin, I think, and take a slow drink. I try to trace its progress down my throat and into my stomach; I want to feel my body metabolize the alcohol, feel it course through my blood, down my arms and legs like rain in a gutter.

I probably won't make out with Mae Cupwell tonight.

But this, I think, looking over at Cynthia, who smiles in return. This is nice.

Six months before being diagnosed with the brain tumor that quickly killed her, my sister visited me in Duluth, where I'd been living for six years. I was twenty-four years old, working full-time as a sign-maker downtown—designing CUSTOMER PARKING ONLY signs for the owners of liquor stores, making nameplates for city-councilors to place in front of them during televised meetings, assembling celebratory banners for the University of Minnesota-Duluth women's hockey team to unfurl when they won NCAA championships. It was the only job I could find after college, and it was ideal work for me, an aimless young person lacking in marketable skills, an aimless young person possessing a bachelor's degree in English but no interest in entering adulthood, in finding employment that required skill or effort. But it was fun to pretend. I would ride the morning bus with people wearing suits and feel a sense of

communion: well-dressed professionals of Duluth, Minnesota, I am just like you!

We are riding on a bus to work!

I am an adult!

My sister, though, was forty-one years old. She had two daughters, aged eleven and thirteen. She was divorced from a man who, throughout their marriage, smoked crack and sold guns to gang members. She took courses at the community college, and shuffled in and out of part-time jobs—secretary, cashier, waitress—when she could spare the time. Her cancer was in remission, but she'd been battling it, on and off, for the past fifteen years. She was thin and wan— from worry, from exhaustion, from the new-age diets and juice-fasts she'd been experimenting with since her cancer last resurfaced—with crescent-moon bruises carved permanently in the thin skin beneath her eyes. Adulthood for me was a sort of field-trip—this is what it would be like if I were a signmaker! It was different for her.

And so we didn't often talk—once a month, maybe—because she was busy, and because our lives overlapped in so few ways. But here she was now, my sister, sitting across from me at my kitchen table, her white t-shirt hanging loose on her body, her clavicle and shoulders jutting sharply through her thin skin like a coat-hanger. Here she was, visiting from the suburbs because she needed a weekend away. She tilted back in her chair, now, and adjusted her blue

bandanna over her scalp, still bare from last summer's round of radiation treatments. My sister, smiling at me across the table, brimming with this store of energy and love which she stored within her, which she hoarded and kept safe despite the chemotherapy, the tendonitis in her elbow, the pain that pulsed through her back since she fractured her spine in a car accident twenty-five years ago; from the heartbreak of always coming up short, the business degree she couldn't earn and the jobs she couldn't hold because, every year or two, the cancer returned and leveled her rickety life as swiftly as a hurricane. I sat across from her, looking out the window, at the hamburger wrappers blowing around in my backyard. It was fall, the end of September, and the sunlight was beginning to fade. "So," my sister said, and I turned back to her. She smiled weakly at me through the florescent light. "What are we going to do tonight?"

I had an idea.

My sister taught me to be wary of microwaves. She taught me to always carry a magnet in my pocket when shopping for cookware, because steel is magnetic, and that's the kind of cookware you want, steel: aluminum will seep into your food, and aluminum causes cancer. She taught me that refined sugar is toxic—sweeten your food with raw honey, if at all. She taught me that cell-phones pump microwave radiation directly into your skull, and microwaves will

mutate your brain cells and that's cancer, my friend: use a hands-free device (but not a Bluetooth, because that's just as bad).

And so I lived my life in Duluth accordingly. I donated plasma twice a week so I could afford to buy produce at the co-op. I shopped at the farmer's market twice a week, and was on a first-name basis with most of the vendors, kind-eyed, gray ponytailed men and women who grew carrots and potatoes for fun. And I hung around the sorts of people who raised chickens in their backyards even though it was against city code, who kept bees despite the protests of their neighbors, and who knew how and where to acquire raw milk the Duluth area (because the milk you buy at stores is pasteurized and pasteurization kills the beneficial bacteria that live in milk but the FDA is in the pocket of the dairy industry so you never hear anything about it!).

"I know a farm," I told my sister, now, "where we can get raw milk. Tonight. We bring our own container. We arrive at dusk. We leave two dollars in a bucket, and we drive away." I bit my lip and raised my eyebrows in a way I hoped suggested danger, intrigue. "I don't know how legal this is," I said, holding out my hands, emphasizing my words with them like a businessman, maybe. I was pretending to be businesslike. "Just so you know."

She turned her eyes towards the ceiling, then nodded. "Ohhhhhkay," she said. "We can do that." She smiled. "Yeah, let's do that."

Before walking to Harley's, I sat on my front porch with a coffee mug half-full of White Seal Whiskey resting on my knee. I drank the whiskey slowly and watched the evening-light leak from the leaves hissing overhead and fade into the night sky. I drank my whiskey until the streetlights started to flicker on, and then I walked through my neighborhood, down Fourth Street, down the hill that leads to downtown, and coasted into Harley's as easily as if I were on wheels. This is what whiskey does to me. This is what the summer does to me.

And this is the sort of night I'm having: after walking into Harley's, after sitting next to Cynthia and saying hello and doing a few revolutions on my stool, Carrie walked to our end of the bar with a full gin and tonic in her hand. "I have this gin and tonic," she said. "Does anyone want it?" I smiled up at her. Maybe I should fall in love with Carrie, her hopeless smile, her tired beauty. "I mean, I won't charge you for it. It was a mistake."

I turned to Cynthia. She was staring placidly at the clock at the other end of the bar. Her chin on her open palm. A full gin and tonic on the bar by her elbow. She could have been a statue of a girl drinking a gin and tonic.

"I want it!" I said. "I want a gin and tonic!" And Carrie slid it in front of me, wheeled around and vanished into the back room.

Now, a half-hour later, Harley's has begun to fill up. Ted and Andrew are sitting at the bar opposite me, leaning towards each other, talking in low voices, ironing out their setlist, I imagine. I lift my cup and tip it at Cynthia as she shuffles through her purse. She smiles up at me, raises her empty hand in salute, and looks back down.

I met Ted, one half of Rusty Borealis, a couple weeks after I moved to Marquette. He was a grad-student, too, and worked in the office across from mine. Cynthia had told me he was in a band. "Ted's awesome," she said. "You should be friends with Ted." So I poked my head in his office one morning: he was sitting at his desk, looking down at a stack of papers, pattering his pen against his knee. His laptop was open, to the left of his papers, and leaking tinny garage-rock from the speakers. "Hey," I said from his doorway. "Ted!"

Ted's face was narrow and stubbled; his eyes squinted up at me through tortoise shell glasses. "Hey!" he said. He wore a plain white t-shirt that left most of his biceps exposed, so I could see the edge of a tattoo snaking up towards his right shoulder. If you passed him on the sidewalk, you'd look after him and think, hey, I'll bet he's in a band.

"Cynthia told me you're in a band," I said, and he smiled, set down his pen, and tipped back in his chair. This was his favorite subject, you could tell. And he told me all about it—it was him and one other guy. They were sort of

folky, but not all the time. They were called Rusty Borealis, and they were playing a show tomorrow afternoon in front of the campus library. "All acoustic," he said. "Just a rehearsal, really". I should come. Would I come?

I hadn't declined an invitation since I'd moved to Marquette. These plans, I thought, were mile markers: if I made enough of them, I'd look around someday, someday soon, and marvel at how far I'd traveled, at how much sense everything suddenly made. "Of course I'll come," I said.

The next day, I walked across campus to the library, cutting a current through the students spilling from their classes, flooding toward the dorms. It was gray and windy, and the year's first dead leaves skittered like mice around my feet. I called hello to Ted, who sat on a concrete retaining wall with a guitar on his lap, and I waved at Andrew sitting next to him. I sat on the only bench I could find, which was behind them, and a little to their left.

I'd never seen Andrew before. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, black dress pants, and a button-up Oxford shirt. When he sang, yelped and growled his lyrics in a voice that seemed channeled from some dense internal wilderness, someplace harsher and more remote than I thought a mild-faced man wearing pressed pants should harbor. When Ted sang, Andrew stomped his foot on the sidewalk with his eyes closed and head tilted toward the sky, and he picked at the banjo cradled in his lap.

Ted's songs were quiet, aching: he strummed his acoustic guitar and sang in a reedy voice that the wind kept blowing away. I stared at the sidewalk as he sang, leaned forward on the bench and tried to pick up his words. "Symbiotic" hit me hardest, a folksong whose whispered melody rose and fell as easily as a hymn's:

If you don't call me pretty

I'll find some looks to kill

Don't say you'll never hurt me

Or I'll find someone who will

I listened for a half hour and clapped after every song. No one else stopped to listen, and they seemed to be addressing their songs directly to the sidewalk, the sky, the library and flagpole and leaves clumping around us in piles. And how remarkable, I remember thinking, to look around, to see how alone you truly alone and unremarkable you are—you have a band, maybe, but who cares, everyone has a band, no one wants to stop to hear your band—and to sit down anyway, to bring a friend, to play your guitar and throw back your head and fill up the void with a song.

And now here I am, in Harley's, one of the only music venues in Marquette, a hotel bar spread across the ground floor of the Ramada Inn: red vinyl booths, carpeted floors, a popcorn machine lit up in the corner. It has a

decayed, lounge-lizard feel to it, with dim-lighting and lots of sad-eyed men staring wanly after pretty, too-young waitresses. It's a strange place for a show, cramped and ugly, the sort of bar that has probably hosted a hundred middle-aged crises—but there isn't anywhere else to play in Marquette. So they play here.

I spin my stool again and make a full revolution: I look blearily at Ted and Andrew, at the popcorn machine, at Cynthia looking up from her purse and smiling quizzically at me, at Carrie drying a glass, blowing a strand of hair from her forehead, shutting her eyes and steeling herself for the evening.

Remember this, I think, trying to focus, trying to pare this evening into something manageable, that I can meditate on, that I can carry with me later. Just try to remember this.

My sister and I were sitting in my 1993 Saturn SL which I was driving down Highway 210, just south of Duluth, one of my favorite roads, because it skirts the edges of cliffs tumbling steeply down into the St. Louis River, because it plunges suddenly into valleys and climbs swiftly back up, because it's canopied by the branches of maple and birch trees that grow inches from the road's edge so that the sky is invisible overhead, blotted out by the leaves, which were all red and yellow tonight, in September, so that the entire funcoaster road was enclosed

within a shimmering, florescent tunnel. And, what's more, we were driving it in my Saturn—which had 280,000 miles on it, which began to shake whenever the speedometer approached sixty, whose trunk was held shut by a bungee cord because I left it in neutral, once, after parking in my driveway and it rolled down a hill and slammed into a tree. But no matter: I knew this car well, I'd owned for seven years, and I'd come to view it as a mechanical extension of me. So I handled the road with grace, yes, with a dancer's finesse: I didn't slow for curves or hills, I hugged the highway's white line and steered only with the thumb and index finger of my right hand. I let my left arm hang out the open window and I slapped my palm against the door frame in time with the music blasting from my speakers—early Kinks, in deference to my sister's love of classic rock—and every time we crested a hill and began our descent my Saturn's trunk would open wide and slam shut with a resounding *whump* as if to put audible exclamation on the astonishing job I was doing driving my car.

We didn't talk, my sister and I. The car was filled with wind and music, and conversation would have been impossible. Which was how I wanted it: I wanted experience—color and speed and noise and flash—unparsed by conversation. I looked over at her. She was leaning forward in her seat, looking up through the windshield at the leaves overhead, smiling at where we were, the beauty of the road, the strangeness of our errand (an empty milk jug was

wedged in the console between us). I looked over at her then and I suddenly remembered her young. I remembered standing at the end of my parents' driveway (I was six, maybe), squinting down the street, and seeing my sister in the distance, coming towards me on rollerblades. She was holding a leash with both hands, water-skiier style, that was attached her basset-hound, Auggie, who galloped clumsily ahead and pulled her jerkily forward. She sped by me laughing, her hair streaming behind her. This was my sister. And this was still my sister, only the cancer was concealing it. But we would restore her tonight, speeding through the twilight in my shitty car towards a black-market milk farm. We would drive too fast towards uncertain ends and in this way we would beat the cancer, and my ex-brother in law, and the woman at the Salvation Army who said, when my sister asked for help after my brother-in-law emptied their checking-account and disappeared, *if we give you help this month you'll just need it again next month*, and the holistic doctors who, three weeks before she died, convinced her that light therapy and meditation would cure her, and the funeral home director, who couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old, who spoke in a mumbly, mock-solemn voice and looked down at the floor with his hands cusped in front of him and tried to upsell my parents to a more expensive coffin. We would beat it all, my sister and I, the many and varied forces that strove to make her life ugly. I glanced at her again as we climbed a hill, and she

was leaning back in her seat, now, with her hands folded in her lap, and her head was turned towards her window at the trees blurring by, and the light pouring through her window was like honey, and her bandanna rippled like a flag in the roaring wind, and I shifted down to fourth gear and my engine whined we drove on and on into the deepening night.

At Harley's, I'm standing now, leaning against the bar, looking up at Carrie and shouting over the noise for a Long Island iced tea, when I see Mae Cupwell walk through the door to my right.

"Mae!" I shout, turning to face her. And here, again, is that loosening in my chest, the same whenever I see her, a jagged chunk of ice breaking off and plummeting into my blood, streaming through my body and chilling my limbs. Mae Cupwell, peeling a dark comma of hair from her forehead and arching her back; Mae Cupwell, standing on her toes to see over the pack of undergrads clotting the entryway. I wave at her, and she beams and hunches her shoulders before disappearing into the swell of people.

But I'll talk to her later tonight. So I turn around, I grab my drink, and I lift it up to Cynthia, still sitting to my right. And when the music starts, I walk to where it's happening stand directly in front Ted and Andrew, who smile back at me as they play. I'm the only one standing up front but I don't care—because

they've started playing and I want to be close, because their music has seeped into my life, has colored and lent coherence to the world around me. I see them play once, sometimes twice a week. I bought their album—*Fell Down Pretty*—the day they released it, and I have the songs memorized, all of them. When I sit in my office, sometimes, I'll start whistling as I grade student essays, and Cynthia will turn around in her desk, look over at me and say, *yeah*, before I even realize what I'm whistling: "See-Saw," my favorite Rusty Borealis song, one of Ted's. Because, the last time I saw them, they were playing in the children's museum, and I sat cross-legged on the floor with ten of my friends and felt *in* on something, felt bound with some small but definite force for good; because, once, when I saw them play at a house show, they gave me a snare drum and hi-hat cymbal and let me keep time. And so I stand up front when they play because this is where I belong—it is so good to belong somewhere—and I sing and sway along as I drink my long island iced tea because I know all of the words:

We heard birds that sing caw

We saw bugs with wings crawl

We felt things that freeze thaw

Sitting at the see-saw—

I know all of the words and I am in a room full of people I know and love, one of whom, Mae Cupwell, is standing next to me, now, standing next to me and

looking up at the ceiling with drooping eyes and a blissed-out smile, and she's singing along because she knows the words, too. And here we are, standing up front, sweating and singing and swaying, Mae and I, grabbing and holding onto this song as though it were a rope attached to a rescue boat.

It was dark when we found the farm, but we found it. My sister and I found it. My only directions, written on a post-it note and attained third-hand from a friend at the food co-op, were "take the highway until the silo. Then turn left" — but after some circling, after two wrong turns at two false silos, we slowed in front of a driveway with a silo and sign that read "ANDERSON'S DAIRY" in red blocky font. So we turned left and crept into the driveway, winding through pasture for a few hundred feet and ending at a wide spot in the road surrounded by outbuildings and sheds and large unfamiliar farm-things made of metal. Threshers, maybe? I didn't know what a thresher was. But maybe these were threshers.

It was fully dark by then. At the edge of the parking area stood a running tractor, its headlight on and pointing at one of the buildings. We pulled up to the building, a long low structure with a sloped roof. I cut the engine, flipped off the headlights.

“That tractor,” my sister said, looking out her window. The car was filled with noise—the rumble of the running tractor, and a whirring, refrigerator-noise coming from the building—and she had to speak forcefully to be heard. “That tractor is alive. We’re in a Stephen King novel, and that tractor is going to kill us.” These are the sorts of things my sister would say.

To my left, a windowed door into the building. The window was bright, pouring a parallelogram of yellow light onto the gravel.

“The milk must be in there,” I said. I looked over at my sister—she was turned towards her window. Her shoulders were slender, and her head seemed very fragile wrapped in its bandanna. “I think the tractor wants us to go into this building,” I said. She turned to look at me, her face pale in the half-light, her eyes tired, but glinting. She smiled thinly and widened her eyes. I thought she looked very amused—at where we were, at what I’d decided to do with our Friday night. I could have hugged her.

“Okay,” she said. So I grabbed our plastic-jug, and we got out of the car.

The building’s whir grew louder as we approached the entrance. The gravel crunched under my feet, and my sister followed alongside me. In front of the door, I took a breath and shielded my eyes and looked into the window—and there was a girl. Maybe ten years old. Long rope of blond hair, red t-shirt, jeans: a horse-riding girl, you could tell. Standing between a long wooden table and a

metal holding tank. She looked up at me, screamed inaudibly, and sprinted through a doorway into the rest of the building.

I kept looking into the room, piecing together what I'd just seen.

"A little girl just saw me and screamed. She ran away," I said to my sister.

"Oh," she said. "Oh. So that was probably a ghost, right?" I loved my sister.

"Yeah, probably," I said. I paused, backed away from the door. "We should go in."

And we did. And the whirring turned to a roaring when I opened the door, and the light was clinical and hospital-bright. Next to the holding tank, there was a square table holding an open notebook and a coffee can. A pen lay across the top of the notebook, and the coffee can was full of dollar bills. On the paper, people had written their names, the date, how much milk they took.

The holding tank had a spout about a foot off the floor, and I crouched to fill up the jug. The milk poured out thick, and was tinged a buttery yellow. "This is how milk should look!" I shouted, looking over my shoulder at my sister. Though what was I talking about? I had no idea what I was talking about.

"Sure!" she shouted back.

And I wrote our initials in the book—RH and CF. 1 gallon. 9/26/08—and threw two crumpled dollar bills in the can. And we drove home in silence, the

jug full on the console between us. Eight months later, she was diagnosed with the tumor that killed her. And things happened very quickly. Six weeks after that, she woke up blind, and called my nieces into her room, asking them to turn on the lights, please, though the room was sunny and full of light. Two weeks later, she was unconscious in a hospital bed, her body a husk by then, her body a bag of dead leaves rising and falling beneath the blankets. There is nothing to be done with this. Her eyes were open, empty, looking up at nothing. Every few minutes her hands would rise slowly from the bed, as if lifted by strings, and fall to pull at the tubes snaking out of her neck. This is too ugly and sad to write about, and there is no lesson, no glint of beauty, no hint that the world is a good or coherent place. If you tried to find evidence of this here, I would want very badly to hurt you.

A week later, she was dead.

Now, at Harley's, Mae and I are standing up front, up by the band. They're playing "Nobody", a noisy, snarling stomp, one of Andrew's, and I shout along with him—"Today, I declare that I've got my shit together!"—because these words are a mantra, and sometimes I feel as though I could have written them myself.

When the song ends, I turn and look over at Mae, her face flushed and shining. She's standing an inch away from me. She pokes her finger hard into my shoulder and leaves it there for a full two seconds.

"You dance, right?" she slurs at me. "I want to *d-a-aance*."

I nod at her in a quick, professional way, and set down my drink on the table holding the popcorn machine. "I do dance," I say over my shoulder. "I do." I hesitate as the band starts playing again, take another gulp from my drink, then wheel around. "And I'm the best fucking dancer I know," I say. And I clap my hands and smile over at her, and she smiles back.

Then I grab her hand and rest my palm lightly on her back. We sway slowly in place with the verses—slow, gentle, acoustic guitars and murmured words, Ted and Andrew sing this one together—we sway slowly in place with our eyes closed, and then we fall back just before the chorus. We hold each other's hands like this and we wait. We know this song, of course. We know all of these songs.

It's a lonely world, Mae and I sing, smiling faintly at each other, and I'm shaking a little, and so is she, her hands alive in mine, fluttering like birds. We are not going to wander to the lake after the show, and we are not going to make out, because she has a boyfriend, who is here, sitting at a table with friends, but I don't care, I really don't think I care: all I want is to be here, looking at her, this

vibrant and beautiful person, who writes songs that make me want to curl up into a ball, who seems always to be sprinting through her senses, who wouldn't be dancing with me at all, except we both know this song. And this is what I'll live for, I think, these flashes of coherence, these hints of beauty. Because there isn't anything else. I really don't think there's anything else.

It's a lonely world, Ted and Andrew sing, their voices cracking and imperfect, but joined anyway, a small, desperate act of beauty against a world whose ugliness is always encroaching, always just offstage, ready to engulf and envelop like a fog.

It's a lonely world, Mae and I sing, bending our knees a little, breathing deeply, because here it comes—the song is about to explode. Our faces coated in sweat, our hands slippery. My legs unsteady as stilts beneath me.

But I like it when you're around, we shout, shutting our eyes, jumping in place with the beat, our voices straining to reach the pitch, to be heard over Ted's drums and Andrew's guitar. *I'll always be around*, we shout, though what are we talking about, no we won't: at the end of the song Mae will bow to me in a theatrical way, bending deeply at the waist, and disappear across the room, leaving me alone again. And who knows after that. Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow and wonder why the world has gone dark. Maybe I'll be dead in a few weeks. You don't know. Most of the time it seems as likely as not. But, right now,

Mae and I are jumping in place and we are sweaty and drunk and death seems very far away. We've conquered death, Mae and I, shouting *la la la la la la la la la la*, and you cannot take this away from me, none of it. Just try. Just fucking try.

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