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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Laura Amanda Hoffer entitled “The Half-life of a Good Place: A Novel.” I have examined the final copy of this electronic dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

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**THE HALF-LIFE OF A GOOD PLACE:
A NOVEL**

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Laura Amanda Hoffer
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents,
the finest Bristolians I know.

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ABSTRACT

This creative dissertation is a novel entitled *The Half-life of a Good Place*. Set in the twin cities of Bristol, Tennessee and Bristol, Virginia, in 1994, a year of cultural and economic change, the novel's plot develops around a search for a missing woman. The threat of violence underlying the woman's disappearance aggravates existing tensions in the towns, and the novel explores how the geographic border of the state line, with its inextricable political, social, and cultural borders, determines individual and community identity in the Bristols.

In an effort to provide a comprehensive perspective on place, chapters in the novel alternate between five distinct points of view. Four third-person, limited points of view belong to: Joseph Polk, a jeweler whose ancestors helped found the Bristols; Nora Polk, Joseph's great-granddaughter and Bristol Country Club lifeguard; Daniel Clifford, an archaeologist who has left Guatemala to teach at Virginia Intermont College; and Emil Kot, a foreign exchange student from Gdansk, Poland, who views the world through the lens of the periodic table of the elements. A first-person point of view—that of Alexander Getman, a brakeman on the Norfolk Southern Railroad—hovers above the other points of view and narrates the most climactic scenes in the novel, events Alexander witnesses as he crosses the state border on the train. Each of the main characters contribute to narrative structure; for example, Joseph Polk's narration provides a historical backdrop to recent events in the Bristols, and Emil Kot's preoccupation with the periodic table of the elements gives rise to the novel's chapter structure and form, as each chapter is titled after one of the 109 elemental symbols appearing on the Periodic Table in 1994. My critical introduction therefore examines the choices I have made concerning craft, with reference to writers and critics such as Eudora Welty, Stuart Dybek, and Michael Kreyling, whose work has been influential on my own treatment of structure, point of view, and place.

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I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: THE MAKING OF A GOOD PLACE

Pre-faces

I first read Tony Earley's preface to the 1999 edition of the annual anthology *New Stories from the South* some years ago, during my M.F.A. study at Penn State. Often uneasy about the South's appearance in contemporary literature, I was struck by the way Earley voiced similar concerns and pinpointed their origin:

I have a theory—perhaps unformed and, without question, unsubstantiated—that most bad Southern writing is descended directly from Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." Welty's story smacks of a certain now-familiar sensibility, rife with caricature, overstated eccentricity, and broadly drawn humor, that has come to represent Southern writing and, through that representation, the South itself. (vii)

Despite the finger-pointing in Welty's direction, Earley recognizes the genius of "Why I Live at the P.O." He reminds readers that Sister's description of her family is, of course, purposefully exaggerated. Her hyperbolic narrative, meant to convince her audience of her innocence, ultimately reveals her unreliability; more importantly, it is a veil worn thin over the broken relationships and loneliness plaguing Sister and her family. According to Earley, the blame really falls on writers who copy the stunning antics of characters like Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo without rendering the meaningful twists and turns of

Sister's narrative: "if only the surface of Welty's story is imitated, the result is but a shallow and often exploitative parody of a great work of art" (ix). Earley politely refuses to name names when it comes to the writers he faults; at the time, I rattled off a list of some half-dozen authors to fill in the blank.

Maybe because I was the only southerner in my M.F.A. program, or maybe because I was tired of reading about southerners who did little more than yell at each other over endless suppers of fried chicken—Earley's introduction stayed with me. I have often returned to it, using it in my writing classes when I teach Welty's stories and recalling it when I write my own fiction. Just four pages in length, Earley's preface is a concise summary of many of the concerns shared by contemporary southern writers and critics. When Earley discusses writers whose characters have sex with their cousins or never put a g on the end of a participle, he recognizes the power those writers have in shaping a reader's consciousness, whether that reader lives inside or outside the South. Such writers participate in the construction of the South that Michael Kreyling traces from the Agrarians forward in *Inventing Southern Literature*. Shaping his study after Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Kreyling admits the notion that literary and historical narratives help shape identity "is not a breathtaking insight; contemporary literary critics and historians are weaned on the idea of the constructedness of meanings" (ix). However, being conscious of the ways southern writers, critics, and historians have constructed *the South* out of *a South* remains important because they "have been more rigorously schooled than others in the orthodox faith that our subject is not invented by our discussions of it but rather is revealed by a constant southern identity" (ix).

It is not the act of invention that matters so much, since one cannot write about anything without inventing it. Instead, as Benedict Anderson sets forth, “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). As far as the style in which *the South* was, and sometimes still is, imagined, Kreyling first faults the elitist and racist writings of the Agrarians—Kreyling calls his critique “a study of the inventions and reinventions of the South in literature as ways of keeping history at bay” (xii). Meanwhile, Earley focuses on contemporary writers, upset by the way some fall back on familiar, offensive stereotypes that degrade the South, stereotypes I argue similarly obscure history. It is easy, Earley writes, to poke fun at the guy driving around with the Confederate flag bumper sticker; it is much more difficult “to take the poor, the uneducated, the superstitious, the backward, the redneck, the ‘trailer trash,’ and make them real human beings, with hopes and dreams and aspirations” (ix).

If *The Half-life of a Good Place* had a moment of germination, that day I read Earley’s introduction in spring of 2001—whichever day it was exactly—might have been it. At the time, I was finishing my M.F.A. thesis, a novel about a woman from South Carolina who moves to Germany. I knew it was a failed novel; I had spent too much narrative energy attempting to faithfully represent the fall of the Berlin Wall and not enough developing the characters. Soon after graduation, I began to tinker with a story set much closer to home; until then, I had never written about Bristol, Tennessee, and Bristol, Virginia, the communities in which I spent most of my childhood. I wanted to write about the unique tensions one might experience living in the communities

straddling the Tennessee / Virginia state border. Earley's introduction offered me a goal as I began this project; it functioned as a kind of challenge, a call to develop more meaningful connections between place, history, and character.

Earley's preface also led me back to Welty's work. *Place in Fiction* has been a primary influence on how place, character, and plot inform each other in my novel. Place has always sustained my fiction, offering me concrete images or historical events to motivate a story. However, Welty's work has helped me re-position the importance of place in my own fiction by stressing its relationship to feeling, by emphasizing how "feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place" (11). She also provides a cautionary critique about failing to recognize this and relying too heavily on surface description: "Place applied to for the sake of its surface excitement gives a sort of second-hand glamour to what we might call the Isle of Capri novel, but it gives no authority to it" (22). Her words could have been applied to that failed novel I wrote during my M.F.A. study—I had plastered description upon description of eastern Germany onto the page, but the characters merely walked about the ground and the feeling was difficult to find. I hope to avoid this flaw in *The Half-life of a Good Place*.

Place in Fiction further offers me a better vocabulary and a clearer model by which to understand place filtered through the writer's imagination. Welty uses metaphor to clarify:

[p]lace, to the writer at work, is seen in a frame. Not an empty frame, a brimming one. Point of view is a sort of burning-glass, a product

of personal experience and time; it is burnished with feelings and sensibilities, charged from moment to moment with the sun-points of imagination... We have seen that the writer must accurately choose, combine, superimpose upon, blot out, shake up, alter the outside world for one absolute purpose, the good of his story. To do this, he is always seeing double, two pictures at once in his frame, his and the world's. (15)

The notion of the writer "seeing double" is especially useful for me since doubling is a key motif in *The Half-life of a Good Place*. The state border dividing Bristol, Tennessee, and Bristol, Virginia, functions as a type of two-way mirror for the characters, reflecting their own image while allowing them to see each other. Keeping my mind on how perspective is variously shaped around the border helps me, I hope, render more meaningful connections between place, point of view, and feeling.

I take the time here to review the work of Welty, Earley, and Kreyling because they have helped shape my approach as a fiction writer who identifies her work as southern. Though I am troubled by Earley's occasional vagueness (what about southerners whose hopes and dreams and aspirations aren't especially noble?) and by Kreyling's focus on identity politics to the extent that he neglects aesthetics, their critiques are apt expressions of what I have gleaned, as a writer, from much of my wider study of southern literature and criticism: the ability to better understand, and more meaningfully represent, multiple Souths within the U.S. South. Being a southern writer, under my definition, means resisting stereotypes and being aware of the particularities of

each southern place; it means acknowledging the differences in perspective when it comes to characters viewing the same place. *The Half-life of a Good Place* is not a novel about *the South*; it is a novel about *a southern place in a South among many Souths*: a place split in half; built on the back of the railroad industry; divided about its allegiances during the Civil War. And, more recently, it is a place becoming poorer and whiter.

A brief summary of the history of Bristol, Tennessee, and Bristol, Virginia, is necessary to properly introduce the following discussion of my novel's thematic and aesthetic concerns. The most comprehensive history focusing solely on the "twin cities" is the series of books written by V.N. Phillips, an amateur historian living in Bristol, Virginia. Phillips has conducted the most exhaustive research on archival documents, but the books are poorly organized and contain many gaps. While my representation of the historical facts about the Bristols in the novel owes much to his writings, I am especially troubled by the way he largely ignores the issue of race relations. His few re-tellings of white founders' relationships with their slaves are downright offensive; they are slim narratives, rife with paternalistic drivel, typically focusing on a white master dying while "the slaves were pouring out their grief" (Phillips *Kings* 14). Phillips neglects any mention of African Americans' contributions, focusing solely on the economic contributions of white founders and businessmen. While I do not profess to repair such an oversight, it is my hope that *The Half-life of a Good Place* at least brings that oversight to the surface.

The Bristols, almost always referred to as a single city—I grew up in Bristol—are two separate cities founded by J.R. Anderson and incorporated in 1856. Anderson had

purchased the land from his father-in-law, Reverend James King; before that, the Reverend had inherited the land from his father, Colonel James King, whose establishment of an iron works in Tennessee inspired Anderson to name the cities after Bristol, England.

From the beginning, the two cities have depended on the economic advantage accompanying their position on the state border. As Phillips notes, “Bristol was a deliberately planned and founded town with a clearly defined cause and purpose. It is here because of one thing—the termination of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad” (*Good Place* 4). Suffering less than many cities after the Civil War, the Bristols continued to grow, feeding off investments in the railroad as well as nearby coal mining. As late as the 1890s, “there was even talk of a railroad from Savannah, Georgia, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by way of Bristol. Optimists predicted that within a few decades, Bristol would be the largest city in the south” (Phillips *A History* 85). There are plenty of reasons why this never happened, including bad real estate deals, the introduction of the automobile, and the founding of other nearby trade centers. No new railroads arrived in Bristol; passenger train service ended in 1971. Industry closed throughout the twentieth century; most relevant to my novel, those such as Raytheon and Electrolux began to disappear in the early 1990s.

The rhetoric of city officials argues the two cities comprise one, united community. This is evident in the phrasing of the official website of Bristol, Tennessee, which refers to both Bristols as “one community in two states,” as well as the official website of Bristol, Virginia, which refers to them in even more rhetorically-uniform

fashion as “a twin city with no boundaries.”¹ However, the Bristols remain two distinct cities operating on independent council-manager forms of government according to individual state law. Each town has its own mayor, planning commission, zoning ordinances, tax regulations, industrial development authorities, school system, police force, etc. Residents of the two Bristols are routinely reminded of the distinctions even if those distinctions do become routine; for example, residents of Bristol, Tennessee, know shopping in Bristol, Virginia, means paying lower sales tax. The state border is also indicative of much more significant stratifications of class and race in the two cities. As 1990 and 2000 census records show, employment rates as well as median and per capita income for residents of Bristol, Tennessee, are higher than those of Bristol, Virginia, and the majority of the Bristols’ extremely small minority population lives in Bristol, Virginia. For many residents, the state border makes binary oppositions of the intertwined communities: black / white; poor / rich. Imagining the various effects of those oppositions has guided my work in the novel; before any of the characters had faces, they had feelings framed by the Bristols.

Stuck in the Middles-of-Its

The Half-life of a Good Place, stated most briefly, explores the way the state border dividing races and classes in the Bristols signifies larger cultural divisions between the characters. The novel opens with the disappearance of a local woman,

¹ See www.bristoltn.org and www.bristolva.org

Madeleine Mapp, and the ensuing search for her exacerbates racial and social tensions between the two Bristols in 1994, a year when multiple business failures are causing a sharp economic decline. This section of my introduction examines how my choices concerning narrative strategy and representation of place contribute to the social and racial themes at the novel's core.

In keeping with the notion of multiple Souths—and more specifically, with the notion that individuals perceive the same place uniquely, making *it* multiple *its*—I use multiple points of view to tell the story surrounding Madeleine Mapp's disappearance. These points of view are furthermore shaped by very different locations, thus bringing a number of other places and cultures to bear on the Bristols. Chapters alternate between four third-person, limited points of view and one first-person point of view. The third-person points of view belong to: Joseph Polk, a jeweler whose ancestors worked for founding families and who burglarizes his own store in 1921; Joseph's great-granddaughter, Nora Polk, a Bristol Country Club lifeguard and competitive diver; Daniel Clifford, an archaeologist who has left a dig in Guatemala to teach at Virginia Intermont College; and Emil Kot, a foreign exchange student from Gdansk, Poland, who hopes to study nuclear physics and is obsessed with the Periodic Table of the Elements.

Surrounding these perspectives is the first-person dramatic monologue of Alexander Getman, a brakeman employed by the Norfolk Southern railroad. Alexander narrates some of the most important events in the novel and reveals information unknown to the other characters. Though Alexander is speaking to Nora on the day after his train has struck and killed Emil, her silenced voice during his monologue creates space for a

unique relationship between narrator and audience; at times, it appears as if he is speaking directly to the reader. Alexander is the only character who does not live in the Bristols and can thus be considered in some ways the most objective voice; he is aware of the divisions of races and classes in the cities and is able to comment directly on them from a position of greater emotional distance. However, his restricted view calls his story into question. Welty suggests place is seen within a frame, and Alexander most often sees the Bristols, literally, in this way—from his stance behind the window on the train. The information he reveals is second- or third-hand and distanced, remembered either from childhood trips to his great-aunt's house in Bristol, Virginia, or told to him by a stranger on the single occasion he visited the Bristols as an adult. His point of view functions to elucidate connections between the characters, but also to underscore the difficulty of knowing the full story.

Most of the southern writers I count as influences also employ multiple points of view to tell—or to trouble—a truer tale. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is a key example of how this narrative strategy can more intricately develop character, plot, and theme. Passed from one narrator to the next, the story of Thomas Sutpen depends upon each of the characters giving it voice. If told *only* by Rosa Coldfield, or Mr. Compson, or Quentin Compson, the reader's understanding of Thomas Sutpen—his origins, motivations, and affect upon others—would be incomplete and, simply put, less engaging. Furthermore, it would not raise the questions of knowing and not-knowing for which it is so famous. One need only glance at the number of narrative studies on *Absalom, Absalom!* to know there are endless ways to construe the impact of its complex

form. Here's but one list:

[*Absalom, Absalom!*] examines the fictionality of history, the relativity of knowledge, and the making of myth. More precisely it illustrates man's need not merely to make sense of the past but to do so in causally consistent chronological narratives. It is full of characters telling stories that are versions of the larger story the novelist himself is telling...Faulkner implies, moreover, that a novelist's own verbal fictions are the product of conventions, fantasies, and solipsism, and that their validity as explanation of a referential world is questionable. (Bassett 277)

For my purposes, though, it is the way that Faulkner's novel comments on the difficulty of knowing the full story that most influences my own handling of narrative form, particularly when it comes to the point of view shaping Alexander Getman's narrative. As Bassett argues, it does not really matter what turns out to be true or false concerning Sutpen; "everything really happens, in a fictive sense, of course, and has equal weight. The 'false' interpretations of Sutpen are as significant within the text and to a reader as the 'validated' information" (278). What interests me as a reader, and as a writer trying to eek out the best way to tell my characters' stories, is that ever-evolving relationship between truth and community. What I have similarly tried to explore in *The Half-life of a Good Place* is how narrative functions as a truth-making activity dependent for its shape not on a singularly-perceived authority but rather on an entire community.

Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) has offered me not only another finely-crafted example of narrative form, but also an understanding of how borders shape

perception and feeling. The limits of the Marshall Plantation indicate the limits of the black community's authority; it is a line that divides the homeplaces of blacks from Cajuns, but it is a line the Cajuns freely cross, reaping the benefits of the farmland and committing countless rapes and murders.

When Charlie kills Beau Boutan, the full story of the meaning behind his action necessitates a communal narrative. The narrators function as vehicles of eyewitness while the black community recounts the abuse they have suffered at the hands of the Cajuns. Each black character further confesses to the crime, as each certainly has motive. In different style, Gaines' narrative strategy achieves what Faulkner's form does in *Absalom, Absalom!* It is less key to discover the factual accuracy of the events; it is not as important to learn exactly who has killed Beau Boutan than it is to understand how decades of violence and inaction, forgetting and remembering, has made everyone complicit in the murder.

The Half-life of a Good Place uses multiple points of view to similarly show how each of the characters is complicit in constructing the binary oppositions that result in social and racial strife in the Bristols. I distinguish my narrative form from those discussed here, however, as it includes both different characters' points of view and different *types* of point of view. I am interested in how this narrative strategy uniquely affects representations of place and notions of narrative authority. At the same time, I have found that it allows the tonal differences in voices to rub against each other, creating a certain musical rhythm in the text.

I would be remiss not to also include Carson McCuller's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) among the novels that have influenced my understanding of narrative as a community activity. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is particularly useful for me because it alternates, like my novel, between five points of view, and it is a key example of how to render point of view meaningfully and poetically. McCuller's novel is made doubly lyrical by the conventions of counterpoint and fugue she employs to shape her narrative form, conventions underscored by Mick Kelly's fascination with classical music. As McCuller explains, "The form is contrapuntal throughout. Like a voice in a fugue each one of the main characters in an entirety in himself—but his personality takes on a new richness when contrasted and woven in with the other characters in the book" (148). The entwined points of view contribute to the poetic expression of feeling, making *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* one of the first novels I call to mind when Welty speaks of emotional resonance in *Place in Fiction*.

In *The Half-life of a Good Place*, point of view is, as Welty suggests, "an instrument, not an end in itself" (16). In my novel, rather, point of view hones and shapes feelings that are often inextricably tied to place. The characters "hopes and dreams and aspirations," as well as their dilemmas and disappointments, are often related to the Virginia / Tennessee state border. Jacob Polk's lost wealth, for example, is a result of his ancestors', and his own, dependence on the railroad running across the border, and Nora Polk's memories indicate that her mother could neither forget this fact nor forgive history's exclusion of her family's role in the founding of the Bristols.

On the surface, Nora's problems seem less directly associated with the economic and racial strife that affects other characters. As a member of one of the Bristols' most established families, she possesses the privileged position that comes from being a white woman living in Bristol, Tennessee. She has attended the better high school, and she has had access to better resources, such as the pool at King College. While her ancestors bemoaned their fallen social and financial status, Nora has kept a critical ear turned to her mother's laments; Nora recognizes she is, in fact, privileged, lucky to have inherited her home, yet also lucky to have avoided the preoccupations with wealth that plague the families at Bristol Country Club. Of course, after her mother dies and Nora receives the life insurance payout, she has even less reason to complain. Comparing Nora to the tennis pro, William Foster Wakefield III, helps illuminate the differences between Nora's economic relationship to the border and other residents—she and Wakefield have similar dead-end jobs and come from similar backgrounds, yet he strives in ways she does not to cross from one binary pole to the other, having moved to an apartment located just inches south of the Tennessee state line and buying a Rolex he cannot afford to try and perform a higher status.

Instead, the first thing the reader learns about Nora Polk is that she's somehow otherwise "stuck. Stuck at the Z-shaped pool at Bristol Country Club; stuck a foot in a wad of gum some kid planted on the lifeguard tower; stuck on remembering it was a year ago today that Johnny Clifford slipped on a wet filter, broke his neck, and died." More important to understanding her character, Nora is stuck very much of her own accord. Coming as she does from a family that's lived in the Bristols for-almost-ever, she feels a

sense of authority she is unwilling to relinquish; therefore, she turns down a diving scholarship that would require her to step outside familiar territory. Additionally stuck on the memory of Johnny Clifford's accident, as well as her father's disappearance and her mother's suicide, she is unable to broach the thought of her future, given the repetition of catastrophe surrounding her past and present.

Stuck thus so, what Nora doesn't do is often as important as what she does—it is an emotional dynamic I have lifted in part from Stuart Dybek's short story, "We Didn't."² Dybek's prose captures the poetic space between the unnamed narrator and his not-quite-lover, Gin, on the night they almost make love in the sand beside Lake Michigan, where "silent bolts of heat lighting throbbed, perhaps setting barns on fire somewhere in Indiana" (234) while they are "still in the *Here* groping for an *Eternity*" (236).

They are interrupted when police arrive and discover the body of a woman: pregnant; drowned in the nearby waves. The memory of the drowned woman interrupts everything between them, as "each time we went somewhere to make out...the drowned woman was with us" (239). Telling the tale some years later, long after he and Gin have drifted apart, the narrator characterizes the tension between them in the last line: "we made not doing it a wonder, and yet we didn't, we didn't, we never did" (245).

And, it is memory that is similarly pulling the brakes for Nora from the opening scene of *The Half-life of a Good Place*. She is unable to move beyond the moment of

² Dybek's story inspired the July 12, 1999, edition of NPR's *This American Life*. Ira Glass argues, "It turns out that not falling in love, not doing our jobs, not spending time with our families is every bit as vivid and complicated an experience as doing something." See www.thislife.org/pages/descriptions/99/134.html.

Johnny Clifford's death; she has, the reader knows, only tried to get closer to the tragedy by keeping the lifeguarding job that so reminds her of it and pursuing an affair with Johnny's father, Daniel Clifford. All the things she hasn't been doing—like packing up her mother's things, ending the affair, and leaving town—play out metaphorically in what she has been doing: diving, over and over, into the same silent, watery depth. She is very much a woman who needs to come up for air.

Finding the diamonds stolen by her great-grandfather affords Nora the opportunity to do anything, or go anywhere, her heart desires. However, like the women before her, she does not cash in the diamonds; instead, she obsesses over the most recent Madeleine Mapp's disappearance, believing she will somehow become unstuck if she finds the missing girl. Whatever change Nora does initiate is less an indication of a more hopeful future than it is a surrendering of one old tragedy for another. She quits her job, but only because it offers her more time to pursue Madeleine; she ultimately realizes she can't be with Daniel, but she never tells him this directly or comprehends the meanings behind the beginning and end of their affair. Nora's pursuit of Madeleine is merely another in a lifetime of fruitless pursuits. This becomes obvious to the reader, but it is not something Nora herself is necessarily conscious of throughout the novel:

If Nora stopped and thought harder about what's pushing her to suspect Brian and steal onto his boat this afternoon, she'd realize that she's really been dying to salvage a body for much, much longer, ever since her father went down in the lake more than a decade ago, as if putting anyone in the ground now will somehow balance the kilter she

feels on every floor of her home.

Nora's search reveals her lust for control, her need for order. While other characters in the novel may be spinning out of control, Nora is the one most struggling to re-place some sense of order. Her order, though, does not match that of so many others within the Bristols, whose prioritization of material concerns allows them to understand their homeplace along the axis of the Virginia / Tennessee border. Instead, Nora sees her homeplace through the veil of memory; therefore, she slips, like her memories, relatively easily across the dividing line, seeking the help of allies on either side who alternately aid and frustrate her search.

In addition to creative works that interrogate regional and national (not to mention cultural) borders, such as Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) and Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* (1993), Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands* has provided me a theoretical framework by which to understand mapped borders. Anzaldúa begins by noting,

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (preface)

Certainly this is as true for the road running through Balance Due and the Belgian Congo in Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* as it is for the Kid's violent descent into Mexico in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Because mapped borders function similarly wherever they are drawn, Anzaldúa's theorizing of the U.S./Mexico border informs my own thinking about how the state border between the Bristols affects the people it separates.

Anzaldúa begins by discussing, via poetry and prose, how the border between the U.S. and Mexico causes pain by dividing individual and communal bodies. The border is a "1,950 mile-long open wound / dividing a *pueblo*, a culture, / running down the length of my body" (2). Similar disruption resonates for the characters in *The Half-life of a Good Place*. Emil Kot, for example, can find no place to which he belongs on either side of the Bristols; instead, the state border reflects for him an even wider gap: those miles and miles separating the place he now stands (the Bristols / the South / the States) from his homeland (Poland). He is always pinpointed as *Other*, as *Not-American* or *Not-Bristolian*, even though his ethnicity is never correctly identified: "on a vacation with his host family to Savannah, GA, a gas station attendant along the way even mistook his olive skin and called him a *spic*." Brian Blanton similarly persists in calling him *Kraut* an ironic designation that ultimately underscores Poland's history of colonization and military occupation.

As with Wakefield, Emil's relationship to borders highlights the difference between his and Nora's relationship to place. As Anzaldúa notes, the border, the metaphorical wound, is not always negative; it is also her "home / This thin edge of / Barbwire" (3). Borders do not simply split a community or culture into two separate

entities, because a border can become an inhabitable space and “form a third country—a border culture” (3). The third place, the border itself, Anzaldúa’s homeplace, can ultimately be perceived as a recuperative space where divided identities may create new political, social, and cultural values. She writes of her own experience,

In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That element is a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm...I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. (80-81)

In many ways, this is the sort of consciousness that characterizes Nora Polk. She is certainly aware of the distinctions implied by the Virginia / Tennessee border; she recognizes that Paul MacKenzie (white) and Anthony Green (black), both teenagers from working class families living on the Virginia side, will become the immediate targets of suspicion after Madeleine Mapp’s disappearance. However, Nora refuses to rely on the border to indicate blame. She occupies a space “inside” the border where memory, rather than economic or racial identity, governs her actions.

However, one of the conclusions the novel reaches is that this is ultimately no better an approach when it comes to developing meaningful relationships or finding

happiness. Memory keeps Nora chained to place and to past; it limits her freedom. At the end of the novel, she learns that she cannot contribute to Madeleine's safe return—that Madeleine doesn't *need* saving. Such a realization leaves Nora without a purpose; other than knowing she will wake up and drive to the Salvation Army with Gaven and Thatcher Matchman, she has no future plans. Even as she takes the forward step of relinquishing her mother's belongings, she retreats by turning in pursuit of the latest tragedy by driving after Alexander Getman. Listening to Alexander's story underscores Nora's central in/action: she collects memory.

Originally, I had planned to include only four points of view in *The Half-life of a Good Place*. My inclusion of a fifth point of view focusing on Jacob Polk, which added a historical sub-plot, grew out of the time I spent writing Nora Polk. She seemed to need a complementary voice, one that would illuminate how her attachments to place are filtered through history. Certainly, memory and mortality plague Nora and Jacob in similar ways, and he has passed down, without ever knowing her directly, the guilt associated with the stolen diamonds. However, Jacob does not exist in the novel merely as a narrative crutch on which to prop Nora; his story is his own tale that, like the others, uniquely revolves around the intersections of race and class, feeling and place.

Jacob's life spans an interesting period of history when it comes to the Bristols. Born in 1881, he has escaped the brunt of the hardships associated with the Civil War and Reconstruction. Instead, his childhood memories are of an economically-stable place, of residents who believe the railroad will bring enough money to build a city to rival Savannah, Atlanta, Charleston. His memories are furthermore tinted with the historical

whitewash of the time period, which glosses over the fact that race signifies social and economic difference by perceiving a “natural” order. His memories are rife with the sort of white-eyed imaginings Kreyling discusses in *Inventing Southern Literature*; in his memories, his father’s black maid isn’t unhappy, and “Bristol” is undivided.

His present, though, is another story. Jacob is against treating black residents violently, but he does nothing to stop what happens to Cecil—to do so would mean risking his own security. By 1921, the Bristols have suffered enough of an economic decline, and enough black residents have moved away, to make Jacob sense the tensions the state border later comes to represent in 1994. The construction of the new sign over the railroad tracks symbolically gestures toward this fact, its wording highlighting the separateness of Virginia and Tennessee in ways the previous sign did not. The first time Jacob appears, he is thinking, “*Things have changed.*” It is a mantra that sets his story into motion, a story that sheds light on the economic and racial difference reflected in the border between past / present as well as Tennessee / Virginia.

Of course, there’s another binary: southern / non-southern. Critics have long focused on the North / South opposition running through so many narratives, both literary and historical; it has not been until relatively recently that critics have worked to reposition the axis of southern studies. Following writers such as Doris Betts and Cormac McCarthy, some scholars, like Robert Brinkmeyer, have looked to the South’s spread to the West. After Lewis P. Simpson coined the term “postsouthern America,” other critics, like Martyn Bone, have interrogated this notion by examining representations of Atlanta, “the so-called international city,” in novels such as Tom

Wolfe's *A Man in Full* (Bone 208)³. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, editors of *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004), have further cast their critical foci across national borders to encourage comparative studies. Smith and Cohn begin their introduction by referencing C. Vann Woodward's famous argument in *The Burden of Southern History*: "the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America—though it is shared by nearly all the peoples of Europe and Asia—the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction" (Woodward 190). Woodward is often cited in critical conversations that engage the notion of multiple Souths; here, Smith and Cohn argue that his

and other dominant, oppositional constructions of southern identity offered by white male southerners, from the Confederate flag to (until the past decade or so) the canon of southern literature, themselves constitute exclusionary and exceptionalist myths: imagining unique ligatures between the South and the Old World, they figure (white) southern culture and history as a corrective to the provincial hubris of the imperial United States. (1)

Smith and Cohn want a repositioning that would instead "define America hemispherically"; especially considering the African American experience of defeat under slavery would better illuminate how "defeat, occupation, and reconstruction...is something the South shares with *every* other part of America" (2). Arguments such as

³ Lewis P. Simpson coined the term postsouthern America to help characterize the work of Walker Percy. See "The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America." *The Brazen Face of History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1980. 255-276.

these touched on here have helped me articulate the binary oppositions my novel interrogates. The easy division implied by the state border is further troubled by the appearance of what is perceived as “non-southern,” and moreso, “non-American”: Daniel Clifford’s link to Mayan culture; Emil Kot’s link to Poland; Lerato’s link to South Africa. Instead of a binary, the novel reveals multiple cross-hatchings; it is my hope that this better represents what happens in a southern place.

Chronologically speaking, Jacob’s story then also introduces the first “foreigner” into the novel’s Bristols. Jules Chevalier is the character who perhaps most troubles, or at least most violently troubles, the questions of history and identity. He’s adept when it comes to ingratiating his way into the men’s social circle, and his practiced accent obscures his national difference. He claims to be a French historian writing in the wake of WWI; he says he has come to the States to interview veterans, and he panders to the townsmen, spouting flattery for “the good people of the southern states.” What he really intends to write isn’t the effect of history but a very different southern history itself. Knowing that Jacob has indeed burgled his own store, Chevalier helps hide this fact and manipulates the townsmen into punishing Cecil for the crime instead. The Frenchman’s motives are never made quite clear; there is just the understanding that he possesses a terrible and terrifying sort of curiosity, one that gestures toward multiple inflections in the history of race relations in, and beyond, the U.S. South. After Chevalier has led the men in the act of forcing Cecil to hold his hands in burning coals (which later results in Doc Blanton performing a double amputation) he tells Jacob, “Men have written of your lynchings, but this is the history of one who lives.” The fact that Cecil survives his

lynching is important to the way I distinguish my novel's representation of race relations; his survival suggests, more directly, the un-ending memory of violence and the living guilt that plagues Jacob.

The Island of Stability in the Sea of Instability

Given the thematic intersections of place, race, class, and memory in *The Half-life of a Good Place*, I realize it might seem strange that I have chosen to structure them, literally and metaphorically, along the scientific framework of the periodic table of the elements. Obviously, this structure has much to do with the character of Emil Kot, but it also developed as a concrete way to signify many of the abstractions underpinning the novel's thematic concerns. The desire for order, whether as a way to organize personal memory or regional history, guides many of the characters and actions, as it does novels themselves; in deconstructing the order implied by the state border and national difference, I have selected the structural device of the periodic table as a way to gesture toward a more encompassing model for understanding the relationship between identity and place.

The periodic table, the only chart representative of everything that (we, right now, know) exists, is, like a place, full of imaginative possibilities. Certainly, other writers have used it as a source of inspiration for their subject matter, imagery, and structure. Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* (1975) (translated by Raymond Rosenthal from the original *Il sistema periodico*) is probably the best-known work to use the organizing

principle of the periodic table; Levi's work is a hybrid text that includes short stories, science fiction, autobiography, and Holocaust memoir. A chemist who stated that his scientific skill ultimately ensured his survival at a concentration camp near Auschwitz, Levi re-set both the form and content of the table in his book by including pieces titled after 21 thematically-relevant elements.

As critic Jonathan Wilson notes, Levi's primary purpose in this text is to deconstruct the pure/impure dichotomy on which Nazi ideology operated. Levi's stories and essays "point out the way in which the idea and celebration of 'impurity' was central to the development of his sense of rebellion against Nazi theory and practice" (Wilson 67). *The Periodic Table* argues such a need for impurity; for example, Levi reflects on the resistance of pure Zinc to chemical breakdown and concludes that only when Zinc reacts to an impurity is it really alive; he locates a similar celebration of impurity throughout nature, noting there is a necessary impurity "in the soil too, as is known, if it is to be fertile" (Levi 34).

Levi's writing influences my own understanding of the periodic table as a hybrid text suggesting multiple modes of organization. While the table's columns and rows attempt to divide and separate each "pure" element from another, the table inevitably implies elemental interaction and chemical combination; furthermore, it is a text penned by, and one which remembers, scientists from various locations and cultures. It is a metaphor for the hybridity that has guided my selection of characters, points of view, and themes in the novel, doubly functioning as a fitting model for its formal structure.

My novel's use of the periodic table of the elements marginally resembles Levi's in its relationship to theme, given that my book troubles notions of racial difference by connecting characters through a variety of imagistic and metaphoric "equations" inspired by the table. However, my use of the table diverges from Levi's in the way it guides formal structure. In summer 1994, the season and year in which the novel is primarily set, only the first 109 of the current 114 elements appearing on the periodic table had yet been successfully isolated or created in laboratories. My novel therefore includes 109 chapters, each titled after one of all the elemental symbols appearing on the periodic table in 1994. The chapters—they can each be considered an element—do not appear in the same order as the material elements on the periodic table; for example, the first chapter is not "H" and the second chapter is not "He." Instead, chapter order re-sets the table; each title provides a motif for the subject matter and / or imagery in the chapter, skewing the order of the elements to fit aesthetic purposes in much the same way that Emil wonders what the material world would look like if the elements had different compositions or appeared in different order on the table.

While the chapter order does not replicate the periodic table exactly, the most climactic chapters do correspond to higher-numbered elements. Those elements, as well as the elements that have been successfully synthesized and added to the table since 1994, are extremely unstable; their half-lives are measured in milliseconds. However, scientists today predict elements comprising an "island of stability" set in this "sea of instability," as-of-yet-un-synthesized elements with half-lives of several days or more

and unknown potentials.⁴ It is arguably the most interesting problem the table poses: why do elements that have consistently increasing atomic weights and decreasing half-lives suddenly give way to significantly more stable elements? Scientists know the island of stability exists, but they do not know why; it confounds and defies expectations concerning order and time. The island of stability is a compelling principle to translate into language and narrative, and my novel thus additionally uses it as a guide for its pacing and chronology. Though the story unfolds over the span of a few months in 1921 / 1922, as well as a week in 1994, the shifts between chapters and points of view also involve constant shifts in setting and time. My novel mines the raw material of the Periodic Table because it has the potential to unify the feelings behind the story—it is the lens through which Emil Kot views place; it defines character; it inspires metaphor; it provides structure; it compresses feeling by turning the crank on time and reducing the distance between significant moments. Scientists today cannot talk about the material elements—the most basic bits of place—without also talking about the consequences of time. And, time is the stuff of history; it stresses and ages and shapes place in the same way it does character.

⁴ American chemist and Nobel Prize Winner Glenn T. Seaborg first calculated the probability of the island of stability in 1966. The elements that have been isolated since 1994, those closer to the island of stability, are noteworthy because they make gaps in the table; for example, scientists have found elements 114 and 116, but not 113 and 115.

Conclusions: Pleasing Illusions

As I do not suffer under the illusion that *The Half-life of a Good Place* is finished—that it needs no further revision—I understand that many of the thematic and aesthetic underpinnings I have discussed here still need further refinement, particularly when it comes to blending them into a more artful whole. And, my ability to articulate how that artful whole may be specifically achieved in this novel, or in any fiction I write, needs similar development. It is incredibly difficult for the writer herself to explain her own fiction—crafting a coherent narrative to explain all the inspirations and images, structural rhythms and feelings, that have made a shape out of the mud is often more difficult than crafting the novel itself. Furthermore, it is often discouraged. I model my own creative writing classes after the etiquette observed in every workshop I have ever taken: the student writer must remain silent—must not explain, and certainly must not defend—her work while others are offering their interpretations and critiques. Of course, this is necessary for the writer’s development; she has to know if the vision in her mind is really the vision on the page. Keeping quiet and listening to the reader, like the act of observing, helps the writer achieve, as Welty argues is necessary, that act of seeing doubly, of presenting “two pictures at once in his frame, his and the world’s” (15). Welty further explains that it is the writer’s “passion, I should say—to make the reader see only one of the pictures—the author’s—under the pleasing illusion that it is the world’s; this enormity is the accomplishment of a good story” (15). When it comes to fiction,

observation rather than explanation—that act of being willing to consider how another observes the world—is the route by which a developing writer is told to travel.

Obviously, however, Welty's *Place in Fiction* tries to explain that inexplicable thing that happens when a good writer, the one who observes, puts pen to paper:

The bad novel of today is unhappily like the tale told to the analyst.

It is not communication, it is confession....Surely what is indicated is for us not to confess ourselves, but to commit ourselves. Only when the best writer on earth is ready and willing, and of course able, to commit himself to his subject can he truly know it—that is, absorb it, embrace it in his mind, take it to his heart, speak it in plain words.

This has to be done. (24)

For the good writer, crossing the line between observing and explaining similarly has to be done, as it never works for the writer, when asked what her novel's about, to answer, "It's about 220 pages." Good novels are complicated and messy things. They have to be to represent the complicated, messy nature of life, but they also have to look like they aren't complicated and messy. A novel has to give that illusion of coherence, that feeling of organized experience, that glimmer of meaning writers and readers crave. Being able to articulate how that illusion came to be is certainly part of the trick.

Just as this introduction began, I am often led back to the notion of place when I try to explain what my writing does, or what it is, or how it gets there. Stated most simply, my writing strives to discover the relationships between place, history, and feeling, and it tries to render those relationships in the particular poetic vocabularies of

the inspiration place. My study of southern literature and literary criticism has provided me with another vocabulary by which to discuss the significance of place in contemporary literature as well as my own writing; however, just as I recognize that there are multiple Souths—no longer one South neatly drawn and quartered—I often wonder whether my own preoccupation with place has more to do with some nebulous way my mind operates than it does with regional identification. Certainly, I am as interested in place as it resonates in Guatemala or Poland as I am in how it reverberates in the Bristols. This is a question that I am still developing an answer to, both for myself and for my characters.

Place, as an element of writer's craft and/or as a site of, or cause for, collected tension, is also by no means a preoccupation solely shared by southern writers though their influence is often recognized by non-southern writers. In a recent issue of *The Writer's Chronicle*, Stuart Dybek cites Welty's influence on his writing; like Welty, he has written about his homeplace (Chicago) and argues that place may motivate narrative: "starting with place protects you from starting with great ideas that are invariably going to be somebody else's" (40). However, Dybek, like Welty, argues that place is not merely a starting point, not merely a static location. Place may be filtered continually through the imagination, may become inextricably woven with character and feeling:

[p]lace is as much mood as story and it's visionary. For certain writers, place, even when it's real, is also inherently figurative, a massive image composed of lesser images and details. it supplies what visions always do: an underlying coherence. Every character, every shadow, every

line of dialogue as well as the whole of inanimate landscape, is part of the design. The characters become aspects of the inanimate city, even as the inanimate comes to life in the mood cast by streets, lamps, the posture of buildings...(39)

This well-states what I keep striving to refine in *The Half-life of a Good Place*: a clearer vision, a finer feeling, a more graceful exploration of place.

II. THE HALF-LIFE OF A GOOD PLACE

O

In 1794, Nora Polk's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather—a no one from no one knows where—wandered onto Sapling Grove, a plantation owned by Colonel James King and situated on the land that would later become Bristol, TN, and Bristol, VA. That first, faceless Polk stayed. He built a cabin on the edge of Sapling Grove and took a job in King's iron works. At first, he tended the fires at the mill and built the coffins when slaves or poor white workers died; he even built his own coffin and propped it against the wall of his work shed. Over the years, he took charge of the iron works and spent most days hunched over the accounts ledger in King's study. The two men became close, but Polk often visited his coffin in the shed and thought *This box will hold a man not so rich as King*. When Polk died, his only-son opened the coffin, and the gold and silver coins of Polk's hoarded wages poured out of the box and pooled shin-deep around his boots.

That son, James Polk, made certain he wouldn't die faceless; he bought up land, grew rich on real estate, invested in the railroad, and sat for any number of portraits and daguerreotypes. He had a son, and his son had a son, and so forth, and each new generation sank more money into the rails, dreaming of a new Atlanta or at least a Charleston. They failed: They couldn't attract the necessary industry; they hid from the Civil War; they lost railway contracts; they faded out of the newspapers and into the East Hill cemetery.

Exactly two hundred years after that first, faceless man walked out of the woods, all that's left of the Polk line is Nora: 19-years-old and 5-feet-tall, a competitive diver whose blonde hair turns green in the chlorinated water. And, Nora Polk is stuck. Stuck at the Z-shaped pool at Bristol Country Club; stuck a foot in a wad of gum some kid planted on the lifeguard tower; stuck on remembering it was a year ago today that Johnny Clifford slipped on a wet filter, broke his neck, and died. So stuck, she's aiming low: all she has to do today, August 8th, 1994, is keep these kids afloat.

Nora sits on the tower above the shallow end, sweat gathering in the crooks of her knees. She wears a Club-issued, hunter-green bathing suit and spins her whistle on her index finger. She guesses the kids in the pool today don't remember Johnny Clifford. They cartwheel off the diving board and splash around in water wings. They do backflips in the shallow-end and hold themselves up by the pool edge. In particular, Nora notices a chubby boy wearing blue trunks and a mean gold chain who is aiming a water pistol at his sister's face. The little girl backs up past the 4-foot mark, heading for 5-feet. What's-the-girl's-name—Brittany? Bethany?—is in the 9:00 a.m. swim class, and Nora knows she has a tendency to sink to the bottom when she gets out of her depth.

Nora leans over, snaps her fingers, and says, "Knock it off."

The boy cries, "She splashed me first!" He slaps the surface of the pool; slivers of water fan and fall.

"You want me to get your *babysitter*?" Nora points at a red-haired sophomore in a white bikini lounging on a chaise between three boys: Paul MacKenzie, the VA High varsity point-guard; Anthony Green, a black kid who usually sits the bench; and Brian

Blanton, the youngest son of the richest divorce lawyer to ever draw a fee on the TN side. The boy in the pool isn't fazed; he gulps air and ducks under the water, staring stubborn eyes up at Nora as he treads backward to stay beneath the surface. The motion of the water splits his image, makes his limbs seem to ripple and divide. Nora sees all movement as pulmonary, a mere extension of the drag of lung and the drum of heart; it's like she's down there with the boy, sifting the water between her fingers and fighting the bind of carbon dioxide in her bloodstream. When he breaks the surface, gasping, she frowns, as if by coming up for air he has stopped her from stumbling upon some solution hovering just beyond the last breath. The boy swims away, and it is only ordinary water again, so much like all the other water Nora knows.

Zn

Nora's worked at Bristol Country Club every summer since she was 15, and she alone saw Johnny Clifford slip last August. He had been running on the wet, white edge of the pool, but when Nora spied him through the window of the snack bar, pushed open the door, and blew her whistle, his feet were already pedaling the sky. Water dripped in the air. His head bounced, once, on the concrete, and he rolled into the deep-end.

Johnny Clifford died, but the Club didn't let it happen at their pool. After William Foster Wakefield III fished Johnny Clifford out of the water, he pumped the boy's chest and blew air into his lungs until the EMS arrived. Wakefield even rode along in the ambulance to Bristol Regional Medical Center where Johnny Clifford's body was

straightened and stretched out, broken-necked and brain-dead, on a hospital bed for 5 days.

Johnny Clifford was 4-years-old.

When his mother finally signed the consent form to disconnect his respirator, his father was still throwing money at a customer service representative in Guatemala who kept repeating that the airplanes were booked to capacity. The \$100.00 bills rose and see-sawed in the air above the ticket counter, forced up by Johnny Clifford's father's hot breath. His hands quivered like he had the bends as he pulled more and more bills from his wallet and said, *I'll pay anything, look, American dollars.* When the customer service representative shook her head again, he piled up the \$100.00 bills, ripped them in ½ and tucked them back into his wallet. At least, that's what he told Nora the night after his son's funeral as he sat jetlagged and unshaven beside a suitcase full of still-dirty clothes in room 221 of the Days Inn, where he vowed to stay until he could stand the sight of his wife again.

The next Monday, William Foster Wakefield III shut the pool and fired the lifeguard who had been manning the deep-end tower, the only black girl who'd ever worked outside the Club's kitchen. Then, he held a staff meeting. Nora and the rest of the pool employees wore St. clothes and sat on chaise lounges while he paced about and gestured wildly with his brand-new Babolat racquet: *Everybody goes to this kid's funeral, and so help me to the sweet baby Jesus, if you fuck up like that again, I will insert whomsoever's liver in a tennis ball and lob it over the state line!*

Nora's mother used to tell her, *There's nothing that isn't funny.*

And today, Nora sits on the lifeguard tower, rubs zinc oxide on her nose, and can't help but believe there is something either very terrible or very hysterical about a year's difference: she has graduated from high school after taking seventh place at the diving nationals; turned down a scholarship to Cornell; buried her mother. Not to mention how, one night after another, she's climbed into bed with Johnny Clifford's father.

Co

Daniel Clifford now teaches summer school at Virginia Intermont College in an attempt to keep busy, but he has only six students. Still, he is having trouble with Carrie Vulpe, a girl from Chicago with blue streaks in her hair who takes her boots and socks off during class when she feels the urge to paint her toenails black. Carrie Vulpe also likes to make rude comments about the *dipshit narrator* of the archaeological videos he shows, a man who doesn't know *jack shit about the first hole in the ground much less the Terracotta Warriors and how to get them out of the dirt*. She's the sort of student who doesn't really belong in any introductory course but should be shipped straight up to 300-level mathematics just to keep her mouth shut. Daniel often wonders how she ended up here, in Bristol, majoring in physics in a town of 45,000 people whose biggest claim to fame is that they live in the supposed birthplace of country music and can walk down to State St. and stick one foot in VA and one in TN whenever they please.

Daniel has scheduled a slide show today of the most famous excavators posed in front of their recently-unburied treasures. By the time he reaches Howard Carter plundering The Valley of the Kings, Carrie Vulpe is already sketching the face of Tutankhaman on the cover of her notebook and humming *Walk Like an Egyptian*.

It's at times like now—slide remote in hand, 31-years-old—that he also has to wonder if he will ever move out of this town and where he might go if he did, since the *Instituto de Antropología e Historia* at San Carlos University put a stop to his funding after he left the dig at Tikal for his son's funeral and never went back. Their increasingly frequent letters also pose the question of a mysterious—and suspiciously empty—depression he left behind in the dirt of his assigned quadrant. Their increasingly frequent letters do not, however, bear any even-remotely-accurate hypotheses as to what had filled that depression: a manuscript inked on fig bark that is now the fourth surviving codex of Late Classical Mayan culture. Daniel keeps it wrapped in linen and a series of special, archaeological Ziploc baggies in his dresser drawer.

Just thinking about the codex exhausts Daniel. He sighs, wipes his glasses with the tail of his shirt, and presses the button on the slide remote.

Is he ready to hand over the codex? Is he ready to leave Bristol? Just eleven months ago, he told the *Instituto de Antropología e Historia* to shove it, left his wife in their Colonial on the TN side, and rented an apartment in a blue house on Moore St., 2 buildings down from his new office at VI. He didn't take anything when he moved. He bought furniture from junk shops downtown to fill the space; even his bed is just a mattress on the floor. When Nora stays the night, Daniel slips out of bed and sits across

the room on the only chair he owns, watching her, thinking about how much hurt she may or may not have in store. She sleeps on her side with a pillow stuck between her knees, and, sometimes, at the sweetest of times, she reaches down and grasps her feet as if she's tucked in a somersault, her knuckles tinged a weak blue by the streetlight near his window. After a few hours, he gets back into bed and fakes sleep before she wakes up for diving practice at 6:00 a.m.; he is not sure if this actually fools her or not. He knows he can't let her stay many more nights. The last time she came over and backed him against the wall, standing on tiptoe to kiss him, he just tucked his chin over her left shoulder and hugged her almost too hard, as if he wanted her to sound out the throbbing that went *can't, can't, can't*, just underneath his sternum.

Except for those nights he lets Nora in, Daniel tries to be invisible, but, after class today, he catches Carrie Vulpe following him up Moore St. She raises her hand to block the sun from her eyes, and her bookbag swings against her hip. Daniel turns his back and removes the junk flyers from his mailbox on the front porch. Since his son died, he avoids his students outside of the classroom. He is afraid that, now, when they ask a question about the history of humanity, he might tell them that the study is slow and utterly useless, that digging up the old bones and trying to read their dead language won't help them with tomorrow or the next day. He's sure, however, Carrie Vulpe is the type of person who believes nothing is more valuable than possessing information no one else possesses.

Daniel's climbs the stairs to his 2nd-floor apartment with his eyes cast on the steps. In fact, it's not until his key is in the lock and the door has already swung open

that he notices the sheer white envelope pierced to it—held fast by the mother-of-pearl-handled pen-knife his wife always used to slit open their electricity, telephone, and mortgage bills.

CI

Nora watches the brother until his little sister in the yellow one-piece swims back to the 3-foot mark to perform back flips. Her tummy rolls just beneath the surface, and her face disappears as it circles toward the bottom. Across the pool, her babysitter sits up, bends a tanned knee, still giggling between MacKenzie, Green, and Blanton.

The humidity is bad as gasoline spilled on clothes, splashed on skin. The lifeguards rotate 45-minute shifts on the towers, and when Nora is relieved at 4:15, she pulls her bathing suit snug and walks to the diving board. William Foster Wakefield III keeps a running tally of her best state-dive scores tacked to the bulletin board, says, *Just watch 'em drop 300-a-month on Junior's swim classes!* Nora's dives, however, are limited on a spring board—the approach, the hurdle, and she nails a reverse-straight, dividing the water chin-first, not quite grinning, staring back at the spring board. For a split second, the kids cease splashing and stare. To them, a lifeguard underwater is impossibly devilish, as if she were walking across a ceiling. Underneath, Nora swims blind; the water is a white pressure against her eyelids.

It only takes her that single pre-dive breath before she reaches the other edge and climbs out again, strolls toward the dressing rooms, wringing her hair, dripping as

trillions of atoms evaporate off the surface of her skin.

The AC in the dressing rooms discharges at 60° and nearly turns Nora to stone. She picks up used towels, Windexes the full-length mirrors, and changes rolls of toilet paper. The floor tilts gently into a drain at the center; the room is hot and moist and smells like Cl and Chanel No. 5, sounds as hushed as a vault at First VA Mortgage and Loan. She picks up empty Perrier and Diet Coke bottles, and it's not until she sees the gross-limp lime slices floating on the bottoms that she realizes this is ridiculous—she can't stay at BCC forever. How foolish will she look wiping up melted popsicles or inflating water-wings when she's 30? Is she really going to keep waking up at 6:00 a.m. for diving practice at King College? Is she really going to keep wearing a swimsuit instead of underwear? Or, is she really going to be the first Polk to leave Bristol?

15 minutes before Nora should clock out for the day, William Foster Wakefield III bangs on the dressing room door and says that the little girl in the yellow one-piece—Beth-Ann Beaumont; that's her name—has just banged her nose on the side of the pool doing back-flips, has one hell of a nosebleed, won't stop crying, and can't find her babysitter who was last seen kissing the VA High varsity point-guard and cartwheeling off the diving board.

S

In 22 days, Emil Kot will fly back to Warsaw and ride the train north to Gdansk. He will live again on the edge of Poland and swim once more in the bitter Baltic. Until

then, he wants to make the most of his time left in the States; his host parents are on vacation, and he stays out each night as late as his heart desires.

Sitting in his attic bedroom window, Emil smokes hand-rolled cigarettes and ashes onto the gravel driveway below. His host brother, Keith, promised to pick him up at 7:00 p.m., but he's late. Emil has already showered, changed into fresh Levis, and entered the day's events in his leather journal—the facts of where he's been and what he's seen noted in the sparest detail. More importantly, he's written that the element La is used to make the light cast by movie projectors and that he is going to a drive-in movie theater for the first time in his life tonight. He doesn't know, or care, what's playing; he only wants to see the stir of the projector's beam as it pierces the dark. Emil excels in mathematics, astronomy, nuclear physics; he thinks in propulsion and combustion. He long ago memorized the Periodic Table, and he knows every mass and atomic group, but it's the elements that haven't been discovered that keep him awake at night. It's been thirty years since Glenn Seaborg theorized the existence of the island of stability—high-numbered elements with much longer half-lives and infinite potential. Still, no one's been able to reach the island via even the most aggressive fusion, and even the last element in the sea of instability to be isolated, Mt, is now a decade old. Emil thinks of this every day, many times a day. He tries not to think about how he wound up in Bristol for his exchange year, rather than in Berkeley as he'd requested. He tries not to think about how he'd hoped to intern at the National Laboratory, or about how he'd even imagined catching a glimpse of Seaborg in some long, yellow-lit basement hallway.

Still, Emil knows how to adapt to his environment, and he charmed his way into his host brother's social circle by playing the part of the hapless, yet reckless, foreigner. The two have nothing in common: Emil is short and wears wire-rimmed glasses and obscure Polish rock band T-shirts; Keith weighs 230 pounds, belts his jeans beneath his gut, and plays on the football and golf teams. Still, they made fast friends last August when Emil jumped off the roof of Keith's parents' home and into the backyard swimming pool with their terrier, Peaches, in his arms. Keith laughed so hard, he flipped his hammock.

The night of Emil's graduation from TN High, he let Keith drag him to a party at a house on Holston Lake. He tried to feel some joy; he even wrote *1994* in motor oil on the water's surface and lit it on fire for Keith's friends. But, he ultimately believed it was a waste: he knew nothing of use he didn't know the year before, and he still had to complete a final year at his *szkola* and pass his *matura* before he'd be allowed to go on to *uniwersytet* in Poland. His teachers in Gdansk had described the state-of-the-art equipment to be found in American high school labs, the challenges the teachers would assign. How wrong they'd been: in Bristol, Mr. Booker's idea of chemistry had been making fudge over the Bunsen burner.

Keith finally shows up with his friend from the golf team half an hour late, and Emil walks downstairs. He has smoked all of his tobacco, and he counts the money in his wallet. He's running out. For the past year, he's also kept the Polish *zlotys* for his train ride home in his wallet. He reminds himself to check the exchange rate and jot it in his journal so he can look back later and remember how much it cost him to live in the

States.

Emil hides his syringes and glucometer, like always, in the deep pocket inside his jacket.

The Ford E-150 belongs to Keith's friend, Brian Blanton, and it's a wreck: the back bumper's missing, and the left headlight's smashed. Emil opens the sliding door, kicks aside empty fast food cups, and sits alone in the back. Keith turns around, says, "Sorry, we had to make a stop." He pats his breast pocket.

Brian stares at Emil in the rearview mirror. His face is wide and pale with green, muddy, lake-water eyes and a jagged scar like the edge of a bottlecap on his forehead. "Like that smell?" he says.

Emil is used to Brian picking on him; it's nothing new. He folds his jacket in his lap. "Stop at the tobacco shop, if it's not a problem," he says. The van does stink—something rancid and sulfurous, covered by an antiseptic odor.

Brian tears out of the driveway before the door's even shut. "Guess what the smell is?"

The acceleration's like a whistle in Emil's ear.

"Someone egged your car."

"Close," Brian says. "Rotten venison."

"Deer meat," Keith translates, as if Emil still needs help with his English.

Brian keeps staring at Emil in the rearview mirror, grinning now. "My dad used the van to pick his last kill up from the processing plant, but one of the baggies of steak fell under the spare tire. It's been cooking for a week."

Keith flips an unfiltered Camel over his shoulder; it bounces in Emil's lap.

Brian taps the steering wheel with his thumbs. The radio in the van's shot, so he's Krazy-glued a battery-operated radio to the top of the dashboard. It's tuned to 101.5, a metal rock station. Emil doesn't know the songs; he lights the Camel and tries to tune the music out, tries not to get a headache.

"Stop at the train station tobacco store so he can get his brand," Keith says.

"Yeah, sure," Brian says. He looks back in the rearview mirror. "You ever eat venison?"

"All the time," Emil says. It's a lie; he just wants to shut Brian up. He flips cigarette ash out the window, and it disintegrates in the air stream as they speed west on State St.

"Really? Huh. I thought y'all just hunted gays and Jews over there."

Keith says, "Don't start that shit. You know he's Polish."

"He better be." Brian glares at Emil and points a middle finger at him in the rearview mirror. "My big brother is queer as Jesus on a scooter, but he could still kick your ass from here to Berlin. Crazy Kraut," Brian mutters and shakes his head and glances at the Rd.. The van's left tires shimmy back and forth across the double yellow line. "My big brother played Varsity for Clemson. How about that?"

"Sure," Emil says. "You should be very proud. Sure."

"He could kick the piss out of some Krauts."

"Right," Emil says.

Keith punches Brian's arm. "What's your problem? Don't you know who the Poles are?" He leans around the seat and faces Emil. "Christ. *Odurzona dziewczyna*," he says. Emil has taught him the most common insults in Polish.

It's 7:59, and when the van crests the hill, Emil catches the Bristol sign as it lights, the bulbs spelling

Bristol
*
VA TENN
A Good Place to Live

The double yellow line in the middle of the street marks the border between the states. The van's in VA now.

Brian slaps the steering wheel. "Here she comes!"

Just behind the Bristol sign, the red-and-white-checkered safety levers lower over the tracks, and a freight train crosses in front of a couple of stopped automobiles. The whistle blares and the wheels shriek on the tracks. Emil can smell the spicy heat simmering off the passing freight cars, each one rusted and tarnished, the color of sulfites pulled from the earth, of ochre and burnt sienna. The train's path falls just behind the old passenger station, and the van's stuck, waiting.

"Just had to make this stop, didn't you? Why don't you smoke regular cigarettes, Kraut?"

Keith says, "Shut up. Train would've caught you by the liquor store, too."

Emil drops his cigarette butt out the window.

Brian glares at the train, twists the volume knob on the radio, and says, "This

whole town stinks.”

Zr

Jacob Polk has been thinking about money all July. From the sidewalk in front of his store—it’s his now, his father dead some 11 years—he watches the workmen tear down the old sign beside the train depot:

Bristol
VA TENN
Push!
That’s Bristol

and wondering how much the new sign will cost. The first one was a donation from Bristol Gas and Electric just after his father died, but the replacement, he knows, is probably costing the city a pretty penny. 1,332 light bulbs, all that electricity. He was scandalized last month when he opened the *Daily Courier* one morning and saw the artist’s rendering of the new sign:

Bristol
*
VA TENN
A Good Place to Live

The city council hadn’t even invited him to see, much less approve, the sign before they contracted the work on it. They just ran a slogan contest and chose the winner themselves! *Things*, he thinks, *have changed*. That phrase is in the back of his mind all the time these days; he finds himself thinking it when he’s doing the most mundane of

tasks, such as opening the jewelry cases to show a customer a broach or pocketwatch or when he spoons sugar over his oatmeal in the morning. Last week, he almost looked up at the breakfast table and said it aloud to his wife, Louise, almost opened his mouth and spoke aloud *Darling, it's 1921, and things have changed*. He had been recalling breakfasts at his father's table in the '90s, back when they still lived just blocks from the founding family on Main—back when State was still called Main. At those morning meals, one servant walked down each side of the table, setting silver platters of bacon in the center of the table and using tongs to place a buttermilk biscuit on each plate, his older sisters wearing pale blue and yellow dresses, whispering behind gold-rimmed teacups full of steaming coffee. Their family was never poor even after the war, and things were looking up for the rest of the town then, too: two massive land auctions the decade prior, four new storefronts on Main, the first St. car, and a great deal of talk about another railroad connecting Savannah and Pittsburgh through Bristol. Compare those days to last week or this week and it's enough to make him think his memory is phony, what with Louise across the table from him in her nightrobe, still yawning and setting a single bowl of oatmeal and a glass of milk before him. He eats early so he can do the books at the store before work because he likes to spend his evenings at home. Louise just sits there for company, turning her diamond ring on her finger and chatting, Jackson, the son she's given him, still sleeping upstairs.

But, Jacob didn't say it. He didn't tell Louise things have changed; he didn't tell her that he's only been selling a few gold chains here and there, that his stocks have plummeted steadily since he built the new house, or that he's been selling off his shares

in the railroad. And when she does notice, he knows, she won't say anything; she'll pretend their fortunes are still grand.

Jacob stands on the sidewalk and runs his fingers down the right side of his throat, quickly, as if he doesn't want someone on the St. to see him. He can feel the lump there when he presses into the skin on the side of his windpipe. The radiation Doc Blanton gave him turned his skin pink and didn't shrink the lump, and he didn't tell Louise that either because he doesn't know how to say he is going to be leaving her soon with nothing. Hardly anything between them is real, anymore; it just looks that way—the way cheap glass can resemble a diamond.

Across the street in Tenn., Cecil, the boy he calls colored sweeps the sidewalk before the Olympic Theatre, and the idea Jacob's been shaping all week clears in his mind with each draw of the broom.

Au

Nora sighs, mad at the babysitter she thinks just stole off to make out with Paul MacKenzie—or someone or other, somewhere or else—perhaps in the trees behind the tennis courts. She steps into a pair of shorts, walks into her flipflops, and searches for the babysitter who does not turn up in the next ½-hour in the snackbar, the courts, the driving range, or inside the 19th Hole where the golf pro sits with the ex-mayor, drinking Crown and Schweppes and playing backgammon at the bar. She borrows a key from the golf pro who tells her she's not supposed to come in here in a wet bathing suit for Christ's

sake, then drives one of the carts through the 90°, gold-tinted heat back to the pool gate. Beth-Ann and her brother sit near the deep end, wrapped in towels, eating sno-cones, and that's when Nora first gets a little nervous, because the kids are dripping grape syrup all over the babysitter's wristwatch, which she wouldn't have left on the concrete, unattended, right?, with her gold rings on its band. Nora picks up the watch, fingers a ruby, and hands the watch to Beth-Ann, says, "Hang on to this, okay?" The little girl immediately unclasps the watch and puts on the too-big rings.

William Foster Wakefield III stands under the awning of the dressing rooms, clipboard in hand, writing down the names of everyone left at the pool; he's worked here year-round for 16 years; he knows every member and most of the guests they bring.

Nora says, "I'm going to check the golf course. Where's Mrs. Beaumont?"

"That guy looks like a regular old punk, what's his name?"

Nora looks where William's pointing his pencil; the boy wears a baseball cap and swim trunks slung just low enough to reveal the tan line some inches below his navel. She says, "He came with Graham Miller."

"What's his name?"

"Josh Something, I don't know. Jesus, why don't you just fingerprint them on their way out?"

"Would if I could," William Foster Wakefield III says. He is sweating hard, a dark V on the back of his Banlon heading for his waistband. He taps his pencil on his clipboard and says, "She's been gone over 45 minutes."

"You haven't told Mrs. Beaumont yet, have you?"

William checks his watch, a Rolex Nora knows he spent 3 months pay on though he lives in a studio apartment next to Rite-Aid downtown where the men at BCC, who by now are mighty obliged to take him to their hunt club up in Scott County a few weekends every season, still wouldn't set foot. "She'd already left after her lesson to pick up her dry cleaning. What do you want me to do?"

Nora walks to the edge of the pool, puts her hands on her hips. It's past 5:30, and the kids have started swimming to the ladders, climbing out, toweling off. The turquoise water calms in the pool. She just wants to go home, but her thoughts land on something hot to the touch, something metallic. She walks back over to the kids. "Beth-Ann, what kind of car does your babysitter drive?"

The little girl's lips are purple. "A gold one."

Her brother punches her on the arm, says, "Idiot." When Nora grabs his wrist and pinches, just hard enough, he says, "It's a Volkswagen." He looks at Nora. "A convertible."

And, of course, when Nora turns around, walks out the gate, climbs uphill to the parking lot, there are BMWs and Mercedes and Audis and Volvos, and one gold VW Rabbit.

Ag

When Nora's mother drove her Nissan Sentra off the top of Roan Mountain last December, Nora didn't tell anyone, especially not the suit from State Farm, that it

probably wasn't an accident. Not that she would know for sure, her mother never having bothered to say much at all about the thoughts in her head, except for the random pieces of obscure advice she'd let slip over the rare dinner together: *save the Kroger bags for the kitchen trash can; hold bread in your mouth when you chop onions so you don't cry; drive fast when no one is watching.* But, those were only the nights her mother came home early from her bakery on the VA side, still smelling of sourdough bread and trailing flour across the floor; the rest of the time, she either rarely spoke or was nowhere to be found. Nora became expert at guessing what her mother meant, and after her death, she did what she figured her mother had had meant for her to do: she closed the bakery, cashed the insurance check, bought the most expensive headstone at Bristol Monuments, stuck a hefty stash in a deposit box at First TN, and kept just enough money to purchase a 1977 vintage, XR750 Harley Davidson. Mint-condition.

When Nora straddles her motorcycle at 6:30, the patrol car's still in the BCC lot. A pair of officers with identical crew cuts are standing around the pool with Mrs. Beaumont, Beth-Ann and her brother, and, of course, William Foster Wakefield III, who told Nora to go on home after she finished giving her statement because he is absolutely sure the girl will turn up any moment.

The handlebars burn her fingers, but she grips them tight, works the clutch, and veers out of the lot onto Old Jonesboro Rd., gaining speed alongside Tara Hills—the wealthiest neighborhood in town where the Raytheon executives lived until the facility closed some months ago. She accelerates south, deeper into TN, passing the golf course on her right.

Mrs. Gudger passes in her pistol-gray Audi and raises three fingers from the steering wheel; Nora's got two of her kids in swim class.

Nora turns right onto King College Rd., moving west now, passing the new mayor's house, the Toyota dealer's house, but already the houses are getting cheaper like the drop from gold to silver because she's going fast, a colorless 55 in a 35 MPH zone, handlebars cooling, hair spinning where it falls outside of her helmet. She closes her eyes and counts to 10 and opens them and she is still on the right side of the double yellow line. Takes the hard curve around Hunter Hills where her grade-school best friend lives though they don't hang with the same crowd now—lost a baby tooth on that girl's trampoline. Leans into a curve the other way in front of Holston View Elementary, the Village Center gas station with its movable-print sign anyone rent for a day: *Garage Sale at 521 Redwood, Saturday or I love you, Jimmy, Happy Anniversary!* Last year, Nora's mother hired it on Nora's eighteenth birthday; all it said: *Nora Polk is legal*. Nora drove by it with Brian Blanton later that night; he snorted and said *Like that was stopping you before*.

Lifts the visor, wants the wind to sting her eyes clean of everything she sees, passes the *end school zone* sign, the ranch house where the man keeps horses in a too-small pen. Nora hates this man she has never seen; she will not look at the too-thin horses; she whispers *bastard*. Hair salon on the right, Domino's Pizza/Compton's Dry Cleaning on the left.

Fork in the road. Two main drags of Bristol: go straight and get to Volunteer Parkway; turn right and get to State St. That's it: two choices. Either way will get Nora

home; is it her home, or is it still her mother's home? She takes it straight, doesn't slow down. The houses get cheaper: a yard with a fishing boat; a yard with two plastic deer; a yard with a fake wishing well. On the right, King College, the school counselor's office, the soccer field, only 500 students, and the speed limit drops to 25 MPH but no cops patrol King College and if they did would they pull Nora over—a girl whose great-great-great-great-someone-or-other indeed worked for that King? And, the boys are at practice on the field, silvery stripes of flesh between tube socks and shorts, so many knees, and Nora winds uphill toward the state-named streets—Florida, Georgia, Carolina Ave. O, Carolina; Thatcher Matchman, boy with a heart of pure gold, only boy who made her gut flip and her knees sing; he lived there until Raytheon started the lay-offs at the end of '93 and his father moved the family west; Thatcher Matchman with skin like dune sand, eyes like tide pools, voice like something that disappears immediately and can't be touched, like gravity. Nora hits the first stoplight, but it's green, and she scoots downhill and through the second stoplight at Virginia Ave. as it turns yellow and uphill past Kentucky and downhill beside the liquor store where Thatcher once convinced the man behind the counter to go ahead and sell him the bottle of Smirnoff for crying out loud it wouldn't kill them, and he and Nora drank it in the line of trees behind First Presbyterian, drank until they were placing the one shot glass upside-down on top of the bottle and turning the whole mess over, and now she's flying downhill on the Harley through those white-hot days again, hitting the break just in time to stop before the mud-red freight cars shuttling south against her path.

Fe

Alexander G-E-T-M-A-N, no middle name, and I'm the brakeman. I take the line through Bristol 3 or 4 times per week to the terminal in Knoxville. Whatever else they tell you, it's me who's the eyes while the train's moving. The conductor and the engineer didn't see the kid cross the first time, is what I'm saying.

I've been working the same stretch for Norfolk Southern since 1986, but I started as a yardman: connecting cars, checking hoses, getting the lading—the freight, you know—in and out all year in 7 kinds of weather with a pair of fingerless gloves so I could grip the wrenches. Back then, there was a brakewoman named Annie, a white woman who smoked Kools and had a busted eye that was always bloodshot. She kept getting whiter. I thought it was anemia, but she got breast cancer and left the line. I took her place in January, '90. She used to bring me cups of coffee while I was in the yard and said, "Now, Alex, you let me do that," and lit my cigarettes when my fingers got numb. Cleanest fingernails I ever saw, and she never was one to paint them with tacky polish; they were clear and clean as the face of that diamond in your ring. Anyway, Annie was like me—no marriage, no kids—and she went into a hospital and never came out.

Freight doesn't stop for funerals, and you'll ask why I do this and ride these cars hauling everything from raw coal to car parts, testing the brakes over and over until all I dream about is their hiss. Yeah, it can get old: pulling trash out of the wheels; chasing kids with cans of spray paint off the tracks when the hoppers are idle. But for a man with no family, you can't beat the pay. I make mid-50s now and that's more than my older

sister makes teaching at in her boarding school in up-state New York. She swore we'd never make a note on a whistle staying down here, and she took the first bus north she could and went to school and found another teacher to marry. She sends me holiday cards, but I haven't seen Marilyn since she was 17 and I was 15, and I'm 41 now. What does that tell you?

So, that's it: I make good money for men around Norfolk and nothing stands still very long. The towns and the yards slip off my window; I've got every stop and intersection down by rote, know every bend and switch-track like the scar on my knee, and Bristol's the middle of the line where we cross from VA to TN, and if one more fresh-off-of-unemployment joker in the caboose calls me up front to say *You're in TN and I'm in VA, na, na, na na nah*, then, yeah, maybe I'd finally pack it in and take that damn trip up north to visit Marilyn.

There's still track in use all over this country; it's just that no one's dressed-up waiting at the stations anymore. Still, it's not what they thought it'd be. Anderson bought up his daddy-in-law-King's land, gave it a name, and drew out the town with his mind on the railroad. Like 100 other cities on the map. I know how it went; my grandfather lived and died on the VA side. But, this town's lost so much, especially these days with one industry shutting down after another, and they want to hang on to this story that peaked when the Carter family came out of the hills and recorded the Bristol Sessions. That relic of a passenger station's still there, its roof a duller green every year. Plus, that sign's on the national register of historic places, if you can believe that.

Yeah, I guess you'd know.

Regardless, you'd be sore to see some of the things I've seen happen underneath it, on just this or that side of the tracks.

Sr

Daniel wiggles the pen-knife out of his front door. He turns on the living room lamp, and holds the envelope up to the light, but it is the heavy-grade, business sort with a blue privacy lining. All day he has tried to stay busy, to avoid calendars, to pretend it is only another Monday, but this envelope, this penknife, won't let him forget August 8th. His wife, Mairi, would say their son *had his accident* a year ago today; Daniel would say *he didn't fall down the stairs, Mairi, he died*.

He drops the envelope on the coffee table and sits on the lumpy sofa he finally bought a month ago at Thrift 'N Gift, staring at the envelope with his ankle crossed on his knee and shaking his foot the way he has since that day so many years ago he found out Mairi was pregnant.

What's in the envelope? A contract to sell the house? Photographs wrapped in a suicide note? Daniel considers carrying it down the stairs, out the front door, into the Humanities Building one block down Moore St. and dropping it into the departmental paper shredder. He hasn't spoken to Mairi in four months, and he never gave her his new address. The few times he actually agreed to talk to her in the last year, he met her at the bagel shop on State St. He thought he'd sufficiently disappeared—he stopped fishing at Holston Lake, sold his Subaru with the booster seat still in it, and requested an unlisted

phone number. What now? Will she drive up and down Moore St., casing the place? Will their old friends phone him to say *She doesn't hate you, Danny boy. Why don't you give her a call; give us a call?* Over the last year, Daniel had even kept the phone off the hook until the dean walked up the street, knocked on his door, and asked him to keep the line open because the dean had been complaining about the busy signal and his unavailability. Dr. Nehemiah Prosky had lurked in the doorway, twisted the knob back and forth, slid his hand over his bald head, and said *I know how it feels, my first wife had a miscarriage in 1968. Like nuclear fallout.* The words made him think of divorce, of wedding china, electric toasters, leather couches raining from the windows of their now vacant home, though what really happened was more like a feeble fizzler than the big bang he'd imagined. Daniel left, taking only the suitcases he'd brought back full of dirty clothes from Guatemala, and Mairi stuck a Century 21 sign in the front yard and moved in with her parents.

But nuclear fallout? Daniel knows what that really looks like; though he wasn't there to see it, he can. It looks like his son's foot flying off a pool filter. It looks like everything that crosses his mind on any given day: William Foster Wakefield III firing the black lifeguard; Mairi's mother insisting Johnny be buried with her people on the TN side; Mairi clawing runs in her stockings at the funeral; Nora holding a basket of baked chicken and cheesecake and knocking on his apartment door; Nora sitting him on the bed and dropping one knee on either side of his thighs; Johnny balancing against Daniel's leg while stepping into his Velcro sneakers; Johnny looking so much more than inappropriate

in a tie in his coffin; Johnny looking like a grainy ear on his sonogram. And, the last time Daniel met Mairi, he found out just how hard it is to chew a bagel while weeping.

With crossed fingers and a sigh, Daniel opens the envelope and unfolds the pages. The application for divorce is from the law office of Blanton & Blanton, and the only thing that really makes sense is Mairi Clifford's signature scrawled—finally—across the bottom of the last page.

Li

It's already 6:15 when the train passes and Nora pops a wheelie over the tracks, speeds her way southwest to Volunteer Parkway, and arrives at her mother's home—*no, my home* she remembers. The 3-story Victorian stands crooked and weathered, surrounded by chips of its own white paint, on a five-acre lot behind the Twin City Drive-In. All summer long, the dusky light of the movie screen flickers between the pine trees and across the overgrown lawn.

Nora's great-grandfather, Jacob Polk, built the house in 1918 and carried his second wife over the threshold just after his 37th birthday. By that time, the Polks were living off the profits of their stock in Norfolk & Western Railway, but they opened a jeweler's shop on State when a neighbor mentioned he'd had to ride his quarterhorse all the way to Greenville to find a worthy diamond for his intended. At night, Nora's mother used to lie next to her and whisper bedtime stories about the Polks. Jacob grew taller and tougher every night, her mother drawing his shadowy silhouette into the bearded face of a

genteel pioneer. He'd don his coveralls and hack timber or lay brick on Bristol's first paved road., then wash up, slip into his coattails, and recommend legislation to Governor Roberts over dinner. Today, Nora looks at the plaque above the door a little longer:

*The Polks
At home in the Bristols since 1856*

The Polk blood had traveled through the male line until it veered at Nora's mother, the only child of Jacob's only son, Jackson. Her mother obsessively dug through old newspapers for birth announcements, photos, and obituaries, penning her genealogy into a thick, gold-edged family Bible. How many times had she told Nora *That's why I had to keep the name and give it to you. We've been here since the beginning. Who got that iron out of the ground? Whose sweat made those Kings rich? This is our town.*

Yes, Nora's mother was a little crazy even before Nora's father died. Abel Turner had been the swim coach at TN High and he first taught Nora to dive. Soon after her 7th birthday, her parents left her with a babysitter on a Saturday and hauled the speedboat to Holston Lake. They cast anchor in a cove near Badaman's Rock and dove overboard, the water still not summer-warm. They were strong swimmers; they never wore life jackets. Abel bet his wife that he could dive all the way to the bottom, and he took a big breath, disappeared below the surface just as another boat veered into the inlet and zipped toward them. Nora's mother could feel the trouble right away, she said—the boat didn't know they were in the water. She began waving her arms over her head, but the boat didn't see her. It kept its speed, never turned back. When Abel didn't come up for air, Nora's mother dove into Holston Lake again and again and surfaced with nothing but muddy silt

in her eyes; the next morning, lake patrol found her still clutching handfuls of it where she lay on the floor of the boat.

Nora's mother came home from the hospital on lithium and never went off—or did she, before she took her last drive over Roan Mountain?

Nora hasn't changed anything inside the house since her mother died. The mismatched Polk collection of Persian rugs and fainting chairs and grandfather clocks just gather a bit more dust between cleanings, and the mail-order catalogues and credit card offers addressed to her mother pile up in the foyer. There's no sense in moving, Nora thinks—the house has always been owned outright. Still, she doesn't like to stay home at night. She drops her swim bag on the kitchen counter and climbs the narrow stairs, wondering what to do tonight and just how crazy her mother might have been.

N

The passenger trains stopped coming to the Bristol station in the '70s, and now it's the Trainstation Mall—just a tobacco shop, a candy shop, and the *Underground* where high school kids make out under sorry black lights on Friday and Saturday nights, but the owners will let anyone in, and Emil has seen both a 9-year-old huffing paint in the bathroom and a white-haired man hopping on the dance floor.

Beside the door to *All Aboard*, the life-size wooden Indian wears a faded lei. The shop smells of rust and cherry tobacco. The owner, Jerry, wears a faded sports coat, breathes off an oxygen tank, and still squints suspiciously at Emil, but this is the only

store in town that sells *Popularne*. Emil leans on the counter full of silver key chains, penknives, and pipes made from corncob, walnut, and oak, and waits for Jerry to raise his cane and knock the cigarettes off a high shelf. He has thick eyeglasses and breathes hard, punching the price into the cash register with a calloused finger. His other hand remains on the pack of cigarettes resting on the counter, where it will stay until Emil hands him the money.

Since Jerry went on the oxygen tank in January, he won't let anyone light up in the store, but Emil can still smell the smoke in the old, dead carpet, kicked up by the customers and circling in the breeze of the electric fan behind the counter. To Emil, there is no riper smell; cigarette smoke, he knows, contains over 1000 compounds, hydro-this and hydro-that, and when it enters the mouth and tunnels down the trachea, the clash of foreign agent with native cell ignites a chain of nitrogen oxides, starting with NO, each one more toxic than the last. It's like his insulin—it's the tingle of compounds clutching his blood that makes him feel alive.

"You got too much money to burn on these damn foreign cigarettes," Jerry says. "4 dollars and 82 American cents."

"No," Emil says, "please, let me have that today, as well." His accent is impossible to erase, and he has stopped trying, just like VA High stopped trying to beat TN High on the football field—where he comes from makes him weak. He rests his finger on top of the glass counter, above a butane lighter so silver it looks white, the initial "E" carved in cursive on the lid. It is a new item; he hasn't seen it before.

Emil pays and slides the lighter into the back pocket of his jeans. As he leaves, a man and a younger woman with blue streaks in her hair enter the shop, and by the time he makes it back to Brian's van, another train has already clogged the intersection.

Emil unwraps the *Popularne* and says, "Ever jump a train?"

Brian's eyes flicker in the rearview mirror. "Yeah right," he says, "Asshole."

C

Nora showers, shaves her legs, dries her hair in a towel, then steps into a black racer-back one-pieces, slides into a pair of jeans, and swims inside a loose black sundress. Her bedroom is the only room on the third floor, a long and narrow attic space with hardwood floors, slanted walls, and louvered windows propped open for the breeze at either end. She doesn't really housekeep anymore, just hangs her bathing suits on the headboard and steps out of her flip-flops wherever. Gold and silver trophies are piled in a corner of her floor, the heads and shoulders of the miniature divers gathering a moth-colored dust. She must drive alone to the all-state meet on Saturday in Nashville, where she will be the first female diver in TN amateur history to attempt an arm-stand triple-tuck from the 10-meter platform, but she isn't thinking about that now; she is thinking about the westward window and the sunlight it casts on her floor, how it seems to recede before her eyes. It is 7:22. She can feel the days getting shorter. August is well underway, and BCC will close after Labor Day. She won't be in school, won't know

how to spend those long nights. Already, she's taken up the habit of speaking aloud to herself in the deserted house, as if to keep the corners at bay.

Nora closes the windows and draws the shades before phoning Daniel. If she talks to him in the dark, maybe she'll find the words she should say. She lies on the bed and clutches the cordless to her chest, thinking *I will say, It will never be this hard again. No, who am I to tell him that? I will say, all I can do is come over and lie down next to you.* But, she doesn't have to say anything; he doesn't answer and there is no machine, just the endless, lonesome ringing she knows is bound to go on all night.

Restless, Nora carries the phone down the stairs to the second floor and wanders into her mother's bedroom. Here, too, nothing has changed—not the powder blue walls nor the indigo bedspread, and certainly not the framed photographs of Polk men atop the dresser. Yes—who is she to say anything to Daniel? She hasn't even moved the sneakers her mother kicked off in front of the full-length mirror the night before she drove off Roan Mountain. “Okay,” Nora says to the empty room, and she rests the phone on the dresser and gathers her hair in a ponytail, the single green, chlorinated streak pulled taut from widow's peak to crown. She strips the bedspread and pillowcases and piles them in the hallway, followed by the mattresses, the end table, the alarm clock. After the first few loads, she really gets into it, pulling drawers and dumping sweaters, unplugging lamps and detaching curtains. She carries each relic from her mother's bedroom into the hallway, thinking she'll finally get around to mowing the lawn and having a yard sale. She saves the closet for last, that narrow alcove from another era crammed still with her mother's smell—the scent of lemon zest and sourdough clinging

to the handbags and slips, to the peasant skirts and her father's old button-downs. Working from bottom to top, Nora separates the clothes from the hangers and folds them. Before she knows it, it is nearly dark, almost 9:00 she guesses.

Standing on tiptoe, she pulls the bottom shoebox from the shelf and steps back as the stack topples to the floor, lids and tissue sailing off ballet flats and sandals. A hatbox rolls under the now-empty bed frame and see-saws like a coin on its edges before clattering to a stop. Nora steps over the bedrail to retrieve it, almost carrying it into the hallway until she realizes she's never seen this box, never seen her mother in a hat. It's old, its lid sealed with a masking tape that easily splits. The grayed cloche is so brittle it caves under her fingertips and separates from its satin lining. "Okay, Mom, what's that?" she says, and scoops out the lining, uncovering a smudged, white velvet pouch. Stupefied, Nora carries the box over to the dresser, shakes the pouch, gauges the gravelly rattle of its contents. She works at the series of thief knots in the drawstring, finally poking a finger into the mouth of the pouch and tugging hard and sending a slew of 2-carat, round, brilliant-cut diamonds scuttling across the dresser and between the framed Polk portraits.

There's a good possibility, Nora knows, that this isn't even happening—that she's not really staring at a stash of diamonds. They could be fake; they could just be her mother's last, frantic attempt to make her daughter's life more interesting. She crumples the now-upended, now-empty pouch in her fist and says, "How'd you get here?"

In the bottom of the hatbox, underneath clumps of spotty red tissue, Nora finds more—a note from her mother saying only *And how long did it take you to find these?*

That's all she's left, except for a clipping from the *Daily Courier* dated Monday, August 1, 1921. She reads it through, then skims it again and again, waiting for the moment this will begin to make sense—*first burglary for Bristol jeweler...broken skylight...Polk says diamonds were insured.*

When she can't stand to look at the clipping anymore, Nora turns away from the dresser and tucks the tail of her sundress into her jeans, then bends into a handstand, her bare heels barely brushing the wall, her fingernails turning white under her weight. She has a persistent dream of flipping into an arm-stand at the edge of the 10-meter platform, then slowly raising one hand, and tumbling from 5 fingers into a triple-tuck. She knows what this means; she knows the more secrets she stumbles over in the bottom of closets, the less tethered she feels.

The phone rings, and Nora loses her balance, crashing against a pool of stunning light on the floor.

AI

Every guy on the train that night will tell you we were on time. We had to get the lading to Knoxville by 6:00 in the morning, and we were on time—no, we were ahead of time. I know because the emergency crews got there not 10 minutes later; they had nothing else going on, and I remember the EMS guy wore a watch with a glow-in-the-dark face big as a door knob that read 2:08, so we had almost 4 hours to get the train to the terminal in Knoxville. Is the time really that important? I didn't note the exact

minute.

Christ, he was a brat—that EMS guy. Do you know him, too? Once he checked it out and saw the kid was flat, he strolled up to me with his hands in his lousy pockets and asked me for a cigarette. Can you believe that? They can't even get the kid's body separated from the motorcycle, and he's bumming a cigarette. So, you follow me all the way to Knoxville to ask me all these questions, and that guy is probably, what, sleeping? I've even known those guys to nap on the gurneys in their vans. Just change the top sheet and crash.

Maybe you should be talking to him; maybe you should ask him when it is he stopped giving a damn.

I mean, we weren't in a rush; that's not why this happened. That's what the rest of the world thinks when a train hits a body, but even the snottiest-nosed guy in a suit at HQ who has never once picked up a wrench in his life, much less run the lines, knows that a brakeman would have to have a heart attack and slump over the lever before a wreck was his fault. Even then, there'd be the conductor standing behind him to take the reins.

No, I've never hit a person before. What kind of morose question is that? All I've ever hit is a bunch of tires and baseball bats and bags of Coke cans and a Remington typewriter—all this junk some dumb kid in Bristol keeps dumping on the tracks under West Mary St. Bridge.

Who? Gabe Short? Well, it's about time I knew that kid's name. Why don't you tell him to knock it off?

Maybe a couple of dogs or cats. Strays. And, maybe some others; everybody's got a story about some other kid they knew when they were little who tied a kitty to the tracks and left it there. Yeah, that happens.

Not me. I've known some brakemen to hit cars—cars with drunks asleep behind the wheel. Confused, little old ladies. I've heard in the Midwest, the kids are so bored, they'll buy a car shell for \$20.00 at the junkyard and haul it to the tracks just for fun.

Doesn't everyone look? Isn't it like a superstition to cross blind, like walking under a ladder? Doesn't everyone go hush going over the tracks? There would have to be something wrong with you to get nailed.

That kid was so bad off I don't know if they could check for drugs or anything else, I'm telling you.

It's a well-lit intersection. You already told me that once, you know—I know you know—but I see it different. Our lanterns make a lot of silvery light right over the tracks, not to mention the height I see it from. There's ½-a-dozen streetlamps right there, too, so I could see the kid, sure. Rode over the tracks as the guardrails dropped, and I thought that was it; I thought the kid got through. We come by so often, cars always cheat and dart between at the last minute. I looked down at the levers and didn't think anything of it, not right away.

We only go through that intersection at 15 miles per hour.

It wasn't 5 seconds before I looked up again, and that kid was back on those tracks, down this time, pinned under the motorcycle. I don't know what happened. I didn't see, and I can tell you for sure nobody on-train heard it. Sounds like windchimes

in a washing machine onboard, and half the time we wear earplugs. I dropped the brakes, but just think—the better part of a mile of coal cars behind that engine. All that pushing at your back. The kid looked a mess already under that Harley—soft and white. Just 15 miles an hour, but not enough time to stop.

Afterward? It just looked like—like metal, I'd say. Looked like one of that kid's Coke cans crushed under your boot. Looked like nothing.

Be

Carrie Vulpe's book satchel is still swinging against her hip when Daniel answers the knock at his door. Why does he have so much trouble searching for something to say?

But, he doesn't have to say anything, because Carrie Vulpe says, "I met your wife this morning."

"This," Daniel says, "is irregular." His mouth turns dry; this is just what he needs. "I mean, I don't have students in my home. I don't talk to students about my wife."

Why does it feel like his voice is a coiled spring?

If he doesn't budge in the doorway, will Carrie just go away?

"She was waiting outside our classroom this morning. She asked me where you lived." Carrie is now actually standing on tiptoe to see past his shoulder and into the

apartment. He feels like the divorce papers might as well be burning on the coffee table.

“She didn’t look so good. She said she had something for you.”

“Thanks, I found it,” Daniel says, and he starts to shut the door, but Carrie rests her hand on the jamb and says, “Come on, don’t be mad, Dr. Clifford. I wasn’t going to tell her, but she wouldn’t go away. She said it was important.”

He sighs, crosses his arms. “It’s a small town. She would have found out sooner or later.” He pictures Mairi hiding in the campus bushes, waiting for him to walk out of his classroom.

Why is he talking to this girl with blue streaks in her hair?

“She didn’t look well. And, she wanted to know why you were living ‘like poor white trash on the Virginia side.’” Carrie Vulpe smiles big and bites her lip; between the wink-wink of her eyes and the shark-toothy grin, it is maybe the most frightening face Daniel has ever seen. Her eyes are full of something—he can’t figure it out, but he bets she knows what it looks like when a lit match is dropped into a gallon of gasoline.

Was moving to Moore St. a mistake? He could be living, still, with Mairi in the air-conditioned Colonial on the TN side; he could be teaching young Presbyterians at King College. Instead, he’s camping out next to the housing projects and coping with potentially dangerous physics majors in combat boots.

“Thanks for the message,” he says. “If you don’t mind, I have some grading—”

How ridiculous could he be?

Is Carrie Vulpe really making a noise like tsk, tsk, tsk?

“Let me put it this way,” Carrie says. She pulls a set of keys out of her bag. “I heard about your son, and I have a very fast car. Don’t you think today’s a good day for a drive?”

As

Nora watches herself in her mother’s dresser mirror as she answers the phone.

“I want you to go find Brian Blanton and make him tell you where that pointguard took Madeleine Mapp right now.” William Foster Wakefield III’s voice is clipped, and Nora pictures him spitting into the phone with his hand cupped around the receiver, his back to the Beaumonts standing beside the pool.

“I clocked out at 6:30,” Nora says.

“Her father is on the board at King Pharmaceuticals.”

“What’s he going to do, throw a handful of aspirin in your face?” Looking at yourself, Nora knows, is one, familiar thing; looking at yourself talking in the mirror is quite another, like coming home and finding a stranger sitting on your sofa. She never really noticed that she gets a dimple in her left cheek when she’s trying not to laugh.

“She just turned 16, and her mother just came back here and told this piss-ant of a rookie cop who has nothing else to do that Madeleine never came home.”

“You’re *still* at the pool?”

“Exactly,” Wakefield says.

“It’s only been 4 hours. I’d ditch those kids, too, that boy’s a grade-A brat. She’s probably skiing laps around Holston by now,” Nora says, but she also heard Mrs.

Beaumont at the pool earlier when she insisted they report the disappearance: *I know her parents; she's been my sitter for years; she wouldn't just leave my kids.*

William Foster Wakefield III, Nora knows, is scared.

He says, "It's going to be dark in about 15 seconds, and Mrs. Mapp is over here screaming for somebody to do something because her daughter isn't allowed to date, and nobody knows that VA boy's name, and I've been getting the machine at the Blantons' for 45 minutes straight. Would you just go find him? It's not like I'm on pool duty. It's your job if this girl doesn't come home tonight."

The VA High pointguard's name is Paul MacKenzie, and his father bags bread at Kern's, but she isn't about to tell that to Wakefield.

"All right, okay. I'll call around. But, if I know Brian Blanton, he's probably out for the night."

"Then find out where and go get him."

"You know, Blanton, Esquire doesn't live there anymore. You don't have to worry he'd answer the phone." Nora pictures Wakefield, suddenly, fired from the Club: wearing a dirty V-neck undershirt, twisting his Rolex, sitting in front of a black-and-white TV and waiting for the phone to ring in his sad, little apartment overlooking Rite-Aid.

"Just find him," Wakefield says. "Call me back in an hour."

"By the way, do you know what today is?" Nora asks.

"Besides the day some rookie cop asked me if I could describe Madeleine Mapp's bikini?"

“Nevermind.” Nora hangs up and piles the diamonds on the dresser. If her mother were here, she would say something about how coincidence is alive and well—something about how it’s the hidden poison sprinkled in your morning coffee.

Ne

Brian Blanton speeds west on State St., wringing the steering wheel and veering over the double yellow line into TN to pass Fords and Oldsmobiles shuffling downtown at 25 MPH. There are no seat belts in the back; Emil imagines his skull cracking the windshield and tries not to look like a wimp grabbing the side of the van.

Keith says, “The smell’s not so bad with the windows down. Hey, when did you jump on a train?”

“In Gdansk,” Emil says. “You can scoot the doors open and stop them, and we’d do that for the air, in summer especially. It was a dare thing, jumping from one train to another when they passed each other. I saw a girl cut in half doing this thing, but I didn’t know her.”

Brian accelerates, passing the Rite-Aid, Paramount Theatre, the soup kitchen, Uncle Sam’s Loan Office. It is 8:11, and it makes sense to Emil that the sky glows the same shade of pink as the sign hanging over the VFW—Ne bursts from C-fusion in the stars. Emil doesn’t see landscape; he sees elements. He imagines downtown as a tangle of Ne, the state border a delicate band of Kr.

“You’re telling me,” Brian is saying, “that you saw some chick get chopped in pieces?” He revs the gas, waiting for the green arrow at Volunteer Parkway.

Emil wishes immediately he hadn’t said anything. He remembers seeing the torso of the girl, face-down, in the gravel between his train’s tracks and the other’s, but he never did see where her legs landed. “Our train slowed down without expectation,” he says. “And, when they pass that close, it creates a vacuum—”

“See?” Brian says. “Now, that’s sick, but it’s something. Nothing ever happens here.” The light changes, and he stomps the accelerator. Emil leans into the curve so as not to fall off the seat. All the stoplights are green, and Brian accelerates to 60 MPH on Volunteer, sticking to the left-hand lane.

“Where are we going?” Emil asks.

“I saw that kid fall down at the country club last summer,” Keith says.

Brian says, “That kid was 4 years old and he fell down, Keith. Big deal.”

“He’s dead, isn’t he? His mother checked into Woodridge didn’t she? And, I think Nora’s sleep—”

Emil puts a cigarette between his lips and looks down just long enough to light it—the strong, tall flame almost burns his eyebrows—and when he looks up, they all seem to see the cat at the same time. It darts across the median behind TN High, and Brian sucks in a breath and swerves into the right lane. Emil grabs the back of Keith’s seat, who is saying, “Whoa, whoa, whoachrist,” just as the right tire nails the cat. Emil turns around and watches it come out from underneath the van, standing on its neck, legs dancing the sky.

“Baletniczy,” Emil whispers.

Brian slams his fist on the steering wheel and looks at Keith. “Should I stop? Should I go back?”

The cat’s still spazzing in the middle of the right-hand lane. Cars are honking and careening into the shoulder.

“It’s dead,” Emil says. “It will be in a moment.” He spins around and faces the windshield, shuts his eyes so hard he sees winking stars of yellow light on the insides of his lids.

Brian’s foot is off the gas. Emil can feel the van as it slows, imagines the temperature dropping in the combustion chamber. It’s ironic, he thinks, that an internal combustion engine is called ICE.

"We are not going back," Keith says. "There's no telling whose cat it is."

For once, Brian isn't grinning, isn't staring in the rearview mirror. "It's probably a stray."

"It's a Siamese, Bri. It's not a stray," Keith says. He runs both hands over the top of his crew cut, laces his fingers, and cradles his head. "Just drive."

As Brian pumps the gas pedal, Emil can't help but look back again. The cat is still now, resting in an orb of St.light pooled on the road. No one talks as they continue south on Volunteer. Emil sees his cigarette rolling on the floor of the van, still lit. He rubs it out with his shoe and says nothing.

2 miles downroad, Brian turns into Chaco's lot, parks under the neon taco, and says he's hungry. As he shuts off the ignition, he slaps Keith's arm and says, "Speaking of, you want to go to Nora's meet in Nashville? Hey, Kraut, do you know Nora?"

"I told you, he's Polish!"

"The diver?" Emil asks.

La

Nora pushes herself on the porch swing and counts the stars in Orion as she tries again to phone Daniel. He still doesn't answer on her 4th try; the line just trills with the steady rhythm of a toothache. This night will be long, Nora knows, if she spends it entirely alone, so she phones the 1 person who might be able to help her with the maybe-diamonds and asks him to come over. Gaven Matchman says he'll be there by 11:00.

Nora's already called Wakefield back and told him no one knew where Brian was, but he just said, "I'm going to be here all night, that's great."

Nora leaves the phone on the doorstep and walks downhill through the pines. She spreads one of the old Polk star-pattern quilts on the ground between puddles of spilt popcorn and pick-up trucks parked in the back row—she never pays to see a movie. Tonight, *Schindler's List* is playing again. Last week, Nora convinced Daniel to come over and watch it with her; she could tell he was nervous about being in public; he started clearing his throat when Ralph Fiennes' character forced himself on his Jewish servant.

Nora simply said *Relax*, took his arm, and walked him back up the hill to her mother's house, but he was gone by the time she woke up the next morning.

Gaven Matchman shows up, late as usual, at 11:18, parks his Buick station wagon with the faux wood paneling three spaces down from Nora. He lifts the rear door and motions her over with a crooked finger. When the Matchmans left, he already had a job at Bristol Compressors on the VA side so he moved into a doublewide and stayed behind. He's 6 years older than his brother, Thatcher, and looks nothing like him—Gaven wears his hair halfway down his back, a bicycle chain for a belt, and silver rings on each lean index finger.

Gaven's also the one who found the motorcycle for Nora.

The gravel of the drive-in lane crunches like broken teeth under her feet, a rough, brittle sound echoed by the vehicles creeping in for the second movie. She searches the lanes for familiar cars or trucks or faces, but she sees only the backs of so many anonymous townies spreading blankets and unfolding lawn chairs. The wet, breathy sounds of long kisses fill the back row, and she takes care to scan those bodies with the merest of glances.

Settling down next to Gaven in the 3rd seat of the wagon, Nora faces the screen and, without being asked, lifts the uncapped bottle of Smirnoff from the ice cooler on the floor. That's the only similarity between Gaven and Thatcher—they both drink low-end Smirnoff.

Gaven's also the one who taught Nora to exhale as the vodka goes down like silver warmed in the hand, the one who taught her not to choke. The one who called the

funeral parlor and the insurance company after her mother died. The one who took her father's brother aside a week later and explained why Nora wasn't going to move out of her mother's house, much less to Norfolk to live with him. The one who came to get her from the hospital 6 months ago after she hit the water wrong at the qualifying in Memphis and got a concussion.

Gaven waits for her to take two more sips and says, "What's up, Trixie?"

Nora hoists her hips off the seat and digs the bag of diamonds out of her jeans pocket. "I know you can keep a secret," she says. She loosens the drawstring, and Gaven leans over. He smells like cigarettes, or is it gun powder?

"Shoot. Look at those pretty girls," he says.

"Maybe. I don't know if they're real."

Gaven lifts a single diamond and runs its point down the window. It squeals like a thumb down a Mason jar, leaves a scratch.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Nora asks.

"I knew it, I knew you guys were sitting on the motherload." He rubs the gem between his thumb and forefinger. The way his mouth hangs open, Nora could drop a penny on his tongue.

"It's news to me," she says.

"What do you mean?"

"I just found those today, Gaven. In a hatbox."

"Shut up."

"I'm not kidding. I never saw these before."

He holds his finger over his lips, then points at a man standing beside the window of the Ford Explorer parked in front of them, talking to the driver. Gaven leans out of the trunk and turns on the audio box next to his wagon, spins it up loud. Liam Neeson is crying, and his sobs fill the back of the wagon. Gaven waves his hand in a rapid circle, meaning *explain*.

“There was just a clipping with them. Said my great-grandfather’s store was robbed in the ‘20s.”

“They were insured.” Gaven says it, doesn’t ask—he gets it right away.

Nora nods.

“She never said anything?”

“Gaven, come on, no. You were there when they read the will, remember? Just tell me how to move these.”

“Of course she wouldn’t put them in the will. Now, let me think,” he says. He swigs the Smirnoff, exhales.

“Look at you. If you had a goatee, you’d be stroking it right now.”

“Okay, Trixie, here’s what you do. Take one of these downtown to Pendleton’s and get him to give you an estimate. Tell him your mom had it removed from her mom’s engagement ring or necklace or tiara or something and tell him you’re thinking about getting it set in a—”

“Slow down,” Nora says. “Pendleton’s the same exact storefront where my family’s store used to be. What if he knows about the robbery?”

“Then take it to JC or Kingsport.”

“Still too close,” Nora says. She jiggles the pouch in her palm. “I am going to Nashville this weekend.”

“There you go.”

“Then what?”

Gaven leans back in the seat and rests his arm behind her shoulders, says, “Then we get you a *really* good bike.”

“I like the one I have.”

It’s mostly dark this far away from the screen, just specks of cobweb-colored dust twirling in and out of the reflection cast by the projector’s beam.

Nora doesn’t care that Gaven hasn’t bathed since work and smells of smoke and motor oil, or that he was probably doing something ridiculous as usual like lighting Roman candles off the roof of his doublewide when she called. She hunkers down in the seat and drops her head on his shoulder; he’s the only person she can do that with, really, since her mother died. “You still diddling that professor?”

Nora jerks like she does in her sleep. “How did you know about that?”

“It’s a small town, don’t you know?”

“He didn’t answer his phone today.”

“I wouldn’t either,” Gaven says.

“You’re the only one who remembered. Even Wakefield didn’t, can you believe that?”

Gaven says he’d definitely believe that about Wakefield, and he starts to say something about how two sad people hooking their wagons together just makes them sink

faster in the mud, but that's when Nora starts feeling thirsty and looks out across the roofs of dirt-splattered Jeeps and Chevys and spots Brian Blanton's Ford E-150 parked beside the snack bar.

"Wait a minute." She hops out of the seat.

"I'm not done talking about the professor," Gaven says, but Nora weaves in and out of the parking spaces and steps right over a couple making out on a picnic blanket and knocks on the side of Brian's van. She expects to see his watery, drunken eyes when the door slides open, but instead it's the foreign guy she never had a class with but used to see climbing upstairs to the library every so often after last bell at TN High. She thinks his name is Eric or something. There's the stench of pot smoke and something horrible underneath it, like a glass of milk left in the sun, and she actually holds a hand over her nose.

"I know," he says. "You probably don't want to come inside." His voice is stilted, the Os dropped like bits of gravel, but it's a deep voice, which is a surprise, given he's only a few inches taller than herself.

Brian comes barreling out of the snack bar, and Keith Housman is just behind him, carrying a paper bag and spilling popcorn in his wake. "Hey look," Brian says, "Kraut found Nora."

"Wakefield's been looking for you," she says.

"What's he want besides a real job and my Daddy's Lexus?"

Keith doesn't laugh; he just wipes his hand on the pocket of his shorts.

Brian Blanton, Nora knows, only acts this asinine when he's around other guys. When he's alone with her, anything might come out of his mouth, like the time he was doing laps around Holston in his family's yacht and found her diving off Badaman's rock—he took her for a ride and told her that his mother had just kicked his father out of the house because Blanton, Esquire couldn't accept the fact that Brian's older brother was both gay and not a lawyer. *Who cares?* he had said *I mean, it ain't like he goes around in drag.*

“Where's Madeleine?” Nora asks.

“Is she here? She didn't come with us.”

“You were with her at the pool earlier.”

“Yeah, and that's where I left her. That girl's jail bait.” He holds up a hand like he's taking an oath.

“She disappeared and left those kids at the pool, and Wakefield is still looking for her.” Nora realizes it's the first time she's even thought it: *disappeared*. She decides—she's not sure why—not to tell Brian that Wakefield called the cops.

Brian shrugs. “Maybe someone should tell Wakefield that's really not his problem. Anyway, when I left, she was still there with that loser, MacKenzie. Guy couldn't out-jump our pointguard if you dangled a cheerleader over his head.”

“I'll help you find her,” Emil says. He puts his hand inside his jacket and shifts something in a pocket in there, and Nora figures it's the pot they have been smoking.

“I'm good at finding things.”

Nora turns to Keith. “This guy lives with you, right?”

“Yeah, that’s Emil. He’s cool. He’s Polish.” Keith glares at Brian.

“What are you pissed at? What’s going on?” Nora asks. The credits of *Schindler’s List* are scrolling down the screen, but when she looks at Emil again, puzzled, he’s staring at the brilliant funnel of star-colored light spiraling above the cars. He points, says, “That’s lanthanum that makes it bright.”

“How stoned is he?” she asks.

“Not at all,” Keith says.

Nora keeps looking at Emil, and there’s something odd about him, she thinks, what with the way he’s wearing jeans and a suede jacket in this heat. Still, it is rare, she knows, for anyone new to come along this place—rare and jarring as falling downstairs.

Ca

Daniel drives Carrie Vulpe’s Jaguar XK-E, Series III, circa 1972, a black convertible with a hood long as a church pew and a grill full of sunshine. He swings between 4th and 5th and carves a couple of loopy circles around Bristol, stopping just before twilight to fill the tank—then he drives out of town on 81 north, pushing 90 and passing dairy farm after dairy farm until Carrie finally says, “That’s enough, there’s nothing good in Wytheville. Turn around.”

Many miles later, Daniel eases to a stop on the side of West Mary St. Bridge. The night hums with fuzz and static. The convertible’s V12 hisses under the hood, and atmospheric haze blurs the phosphorescent skin of the moon. Underneath the bridge, a

train shuttles south, and the heat rising off the rattling cars carries the hot, chalky odor of old bone.

Daniel glances in the rearview mirror and pats his hair into place. What should he say now? “Where’d you get this car?”

“It’s not mine, exactly.” Carrie leans forward and rummages in her bookbag on the floorboard. “I borrowed it from a guy in Chicago.”

“Borrowed?”

“Yes, Dr. Clifford. If you’re going to live in a small town without a decent bus system, you need reliable transportation of your own.” She sits up and begins packing a pipe with cherry tobacco—tobacco she made him stop at *All Aboard* to buy a few hours ago. She holds a match over the bowl, drawing short, steady puffs. The flame casts toothy shadows under her eyes.

“You look ridiculous smoking that.”

“I guess you’re allowed to be a little rude today.” Carrie holds the pipe up to catch the St. light. “It’s ivory. It was my grandfather’s. It’s pretty, don’t you think?”

“Pretty?”

“That’s your problem, Dr. Clifford. You’re turning into an echo, and echoes are dull.”

Daniel knows he should start the car and drive to his apartment around the corner because there’s nowhere left to go. Still, he doesn’t want to go home. What if Mairi is waiting at the door? Or, what if no one is there? What if he lies in bed and can’t fall asleep, again; what if he just lies there thinking about the last day he was in the pit at

Tikal? That day, nothing was wrong yet; his son was 4-years-old and learning the alphabet; his wife didn't hate him yet for being in Guatemala. He spent hours at the site, sitting on his knees with a strip of linen tied around his head to catch the sweat, loosening the hard, dry earth, when his brush first turned up bits of the narrow, broken vase and, 2 inches deeper, the unusual, yellowed whitewash and green ink of the codex. In the 16th century, during the Spanish conquest, Bishop Diego de Landa declared the codices sacrilegious and ordered them to be burned, and, now, when Daniel can't sleep he wonders if whoever placed the codex in the vase did it to save it. He thinks of it that way, at least—some scribe tucking the fan-folded pages into the vase and filling it with dirt, carrying it into the jungle, high on adrenaline just the way Daniel was all that day and the next when the clerk at the hotel handed him a folded note with Mairi's message: *Your son's hurt. Where are you?* The longer he stays in the car worrying about what he's doing with Carrie Vulpe, the less he has to worry about what's waiting at home.

Carrie blows a pair of smoke rings that float over the windshield and disintegrate above the bridge. "We should do something big tonight, something you really wouldn't do on a normal Monday."

"Like what? There's nothing to do."

"You're right. The best thing to do here is get on a plane," she says. "A plane!" She shifts in her seat and looks at him with her face tilted, one eyebrow arched, smoke spilling out of the corner of her mouth, and he realizes that's what it is that makes him uncomfortable—she's always looking at him with her face turned just partly to the side, as if she has only one good eye.

“No. No way. Be serious.”

“Why not?”

“For starters, you have class tomorrow, and I’m supposed to teach it.”

“Oh, please. There’s 4 days left. You’ve probably assigned the grades already.”

A police cruiser turns onto West Mary St. Bridge, gliding slow over puddles of St. light. Daniel watches it in the rearview mirror with a definitive sink in his bones. The officer doesn’t even bother with the lights; he just pulls over behind the Jaguar and steps out of the cruiser, tucking a Mag-Lite under his armpit and carrying a clipboard.

When Daniel looks at Carrie, she’s grinning, the pipe still clamped between her teeth. “Please put that thing out. And, don’t say anything smart.”

“You want me to say something stupid?”

“Please,” Daniel says, “please, please, just for once stop trying to be so clever.”

The officer doesn’t look like an officer—he’s about 60 years old with a gray ponytail and a pair of reading glasses pinching the end of his nose so hard his breathing whistles. He flips papers on top of his clipboard back and forth, merely glancing at Daniel. “You can’t pull over right here. You’re blocking traffic,” he says. The keys clipped to his belt swing and chime with a skeletal jangle.

Daniel sits behind the steering wheel facing the empty bridge and says, “You’re right, I know. I just stopped for a second. I thought the car was overheating.”

“Mmm hmm,” the officer mumbles. “Now, where did I put it?”

“Sir?”

“Oh, here it is,” the officer says. Pulling a square of paper from the stack clamped to his clipboard, he flips the Mag-Lite around and shines it on Carrie’s face, then on the paper, then on her face again. “What’s your name, miss?”

“Carrie Vulpe.”

“We’re looking for this girl.” The officer turns the square of paper around and points the Mag-Lite at it so Daniel can see the photo—a school photo of a girl with curly red hair and a blue V-neck sweater, a ruby cross resting just below her supra-sternal notch. Carrie reaches over and plucks the photo out of the officer’s fingers. “She doesn’t even look like me. That’s not me.”

“What is that? Are you smoking a pipe?” The officer leans over the open car and sniffs.

Daniel tightens his grip on the steering wheel, so he won’t bury his face in his hands.

“Yes, I am,” she says. “It’s okay, I’m not underage.”

The officer shines the Mag-Lite on Daniel this time. “Where are you two going?”

How will he get out of this?

“I live just around the corner,” Daniel says.

The officer gestures to the other end of the bridge. “Around this corner?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I know you don’t live around this corner in those projects.”

Is the officer looking at the car now?

“No, I live on Moore St. I teach at the college,” Daniel says.

“I can vouch for him, I’m his research assistant,” Carrie says, and Daniel could swear he feels his heart beating against his kneecaps.

“Right,” the officer says. “Let’s see some ID here.” He sweeps the Mag-Lite along the length of the car, and the beam lands on the hood ornament, the silver Jaguar leaning precariously over the edge into the dark. “And, how about a car registration?”

When Daniel looks at Carrie, the grin is flatlining on her face, and, just like that, he feels something awkward, like a wishbone, snap clean in his throat. He believes he could really spill it now, tell this officer everything he knows.

H

Nora never did find Daniel, and she wakes up, alone, at 6:00 a.m. She shucks her nightshirt and steps into a dry one-piece, tugs on jean shorts, a tee-shirt, and flip-flops, grabs one of the towels hung on the stair rail, and drives to King College, just like she’s done almost every morning since she was 14. She was a freshman when Coach Landover saw her land a forward half-twist on the 1-meter springboard during first period gym, and a few days later, he dropped the keys to the pool at King in her hand and said *Don’t bang your head*. Though high school teams only compete on the springboard, he’s been grooming her college competitions on the platform ever since, and she paid him back when she ranked 7th in the NISCA All-America last year. But, he still doesn’t know she turned down the scholarship to Cornell. When he finds out, Nora knows, she will lose her key. And, if she doesn’t score high enough at the invitational on Saturday to catch

the attention of a senior coach, she'll probably never compete again. She's still not sure how much she cares—it's not like she keeps a poster of Fu Mingxia over her bed—it's just that she doesn't know what she'd do if she didn't dive, and it would be fun to nail the back arm-stand triple-tuck with someone else around to see it. She hasn't even shown it to Landover.

The pool belongs to Nora from 6:30 to 8:30. She rides around the building and props her Harley at the back entrance. The door locks automatically behind her. The air reeks of chlorine and is hot and dense; it feels thick enough to gather in her fist.

Nora always starts slow with a forward flying somersault. Standing on the edge of the 5-meter platform, she stares at the light drifting across the water and matches her breath to its motion. She pictures her dive beforehand as if watching herself on one of Landover's training videos—sees herself folded in the pike position, knees so close to her lips that if she puckered-up she could kiss them. She looks at the far wall and lifts her arms. Nothing slow-motion about it; all she feels is the stretch in her calves and then she's in the water, 9 feet down, kicking herself right side up.

When Nora breaks the surface, she hears the clanging at the door.

She climbs the ladder, wraps her towel around her waist. Emil's still wearing the suede jacket, his hands tucked in its pockets. He says, "Keith told me you practice at this time. Is it okay?"

"It's not even 7:00."

“I know, I’m late. I had to walk.” Emil slips past her, shrugging off his jacket and dropping it on the bleachers where it thuds, as if there’s something heavy in the pocket.

“Wouldn’t you rather be sleeping?”

“Not really,” he says and turns around. His T-shirt reads $2H_2O \rightarrow 2H_2 + O_2$.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, but she can tell by the way he looks at her with his eyebrows furrowed and one cheek sucked in that she’s spoken too harshly, a habit she’s picked up since her mother drove off the mountain, since she spends too much time alone. Water from her hair drips down the side of her face; she wipes it away. “I just mean there’s not much to see.”

Emil smiles. “Keith says the way you dive is very *awesome*.” He draws out the last word as if to emphasize that it is American and he is not. Nora notices his Os again, and she likes how different his voice sounds. She has her mother’s careful articulation, but she can still hear the East-TN wiggle into her voice sometimes when she is laughing or angry, her vowels turning into As and getting lost in her Rs in words like *fire* and *shower*.

“Are you going to jump off there now or not?” Emil asks, and Nora climbs the platform again and again as he sits in the bleachers with his chin in his hands and watches, her dives getting increasingly more difficult—extra twists, higher take-offs. Standing on the platform again after an inward somersault $\frac{1}{2}$ twist, she sees Emil’s clothes piled beside the pool; he’s swimming laps in his boxer shorts at the other end of

the pool. She keeps diving and ends eventually with the arm-stand triple-tuck, but she botches the last somersault and enters the water feet-first.

After they towel off and get dressed, Nora sits next to Emil on the bleachers and points at the equation on his shirt: $2H_2O \rightarrow 2H_2 + O_2$. “What happens when you split the water?” she asks, and he tells her about electrolysis, how to isolate H, how it fuels rockets, how he wants to find new elements. He says that the elements on the periodic table are arranged according to atomic weight, that if H were heavier, its pure, gaseous form wouldn’t skate off the earth’s atmosphere, that if all the elements had different numbers of electrons or protons, nothing would look the way it does—not the sky, not concrete, not water. Nora tries to picture what the pool would look like if the water molecules separated according to atom type, but all she can imagine is some invisible force cleaving the water, as if the shallow end were peeled from the deep end.

Then, Emil’s speech starts to slip off-kilter, his nouns on the wrong side of his verbs: “Stability islands called there’s a thing—”

“What?”

“Nie wiedziałem tego.”

Nora grabs his wrist, and he’s so thin she can easily feel his pulse flinching against his skin. “Are you okay?”

Emil clears his throat. “A minute,” he says and reaches for his jacket, takes a plastic tube out of the pocket, opens it and shakes out a couple of pink, chalky lozenges that look like candy SweetTarts. He chews and swallows. “Glucose tab.” He points at the pool. “Swimming. Made my sugars low.”

He

Emil swears to Nora he's feeling fine and doesn't want to go home, but she says, "You look like you need to take it easy, and I have to go to work. I have a swim class at 9:00." He knows she's trying to get rid of him; it's just like what Keith said at the drive-in after she left last night: *she won't hang out with us, she kind of keeps to herself*. Emil has to talk fast to convince her to let him ride on the back of her Harley to the country club, and he's not even sure why he wants to stay with her—he knows he's leaving and she'd never go for him even if he wasn't—but there's something he hasn't felt in a long time, something in the way he's worrying about putting his arms around her waist on the motorcycle. The girls at his school in Gdansk always seemed to be doing nothing but giggling, cawing at each other in squeaky, loosed-balloon voices—he was 16 before he met a girl he thought was something more than simply pretty. Her name was Alka, and she and her mother moved in a floor up and across the hall from his parents' apartment. She was 20, a student at the *Akademia Muzyczna*. She wore bright, argyle knee socks over thick black tights and carried her viola up and down the stairs of the apartment building until one day, her mother told his mother, she left a note saying she wasn't good enough for the *Akademia* and had gone to Kraków. Now, Emil thinks Nora is as serious and certain as that girl, which is what he liked about her—she never giggled once carrying that viola.

In the King gym parking lot, Nora says, "See? I don't even have a spare helmet."

“I will pay if the cops stop you,” Emil says. He is so sure he’s meant to be with her today that he isn’t even worried that he probably doesn’t have enough American money left to pay a ticket if they do get stopped. He grips the undersides of the seat and hangs on, his stomach going light on the hills. It’s the heat this far south that really messes with his equilibrium. On the Baltic, the air is clean and thin, more like He than this heavy U, and the amount of exercise he’s always done in Poland to regulate his sugars makes them dive here.

When they arrive at the country club, Nora says he’s still acting loopy and makes him drink a glass of orange juice in the 19th Hole. He considers the fact that this is another place he hasn’t been, and he’s amazed at all the spots left in Bristol he’s never visited, considering it is less than ½ the area of Gdansk and 1/11th the population. He stands at the window facing the empty golf course and says, “Where is everyone?”

“Who wants to golf before 9:00?” She’s holding open the door to outside. “Well, come on if you’re coming,” she says, and Emil follows her—already he feels like he is always following her. A perfect pink oval of sunburn glows between the straps of her bathing suit; it makes him light-headed; it makes him want to press it with his fingers and watch the white prints disappear from her skin. A hand-printed sign on the gate reads:

*Pool Closed Today
Tuesday, August 9th*

Emil studies Nora’s face as it takes on a frown; even her eyes bow like candlewicks; she looks at the mostly-empty parking lot, and says, “I just thought—” but before she can finish, a blonde, ropy-armed guy in a hunter-green Polo and white shorts charges across

the concrete toward them, twisting his wristwatch, looking straight at Nora and saying, in a high-pitched voice, “Where have you been?”

Mg

The only cells at Bristol, VA’s City Hall are drunk-tanks, and the one the officer locked Daniel into last night is coated with a thick, paste-colored paint and stinks of Pine-Sol; it’s made for hosing down, a grimy drain poised at its center. There’s not even a bed in the cell, just a concrete bench attached to the back wall. Still, he managed to fall asleep somehow, long after they made him change his clothes and snapped the mug shots—the swift flash of the camera blinding him like a mirror at the bottom of a long, dark well.

Now, a different officer heaves open the solid steel door and wakes him at 7:30. She’s tall and lean, with fierce creases in her pants and a mean-looking set of fake nails, but she smiles kindly at him and says, “How are you feeling this morning?” and he actually considers staying in the cell. The thought of making the phone call for someone to bail him out gives him a headache and sends waves of acid rolling up the side of his gut.

Last night, after the officer received verification that the Jaguar was in fact stolen, Daniel has to admit that Carrie Vulpe tried to protect him. She flashed her Illinois license—she was actually from Chicago; Daniel was surprised she wasn’t lying about that, too—and said, “See, the car’s from Chicago, and so am I. He’s just my teacher.

Why don't you let him walk home?" By that time, Daniel had already found out that the arresting officer's name was Pete Purchase, though he couldn't stop thinking of him as Officer Ponytail, and Carrie had already been cuffed and told, "We're waiting for another car, and then we're taking you both down to lock-up, separately, until I can figure out what's going on."

How could he be angry with Carrie Vulpe? Doesn't he deserve this, considering his girlfriend is 19 years old, considering he's hoarding one of the most important Mayan artifacts of the decade in his dresser drawer? Not to mention, when Officer Purchase sat across the table from him last night in the questioning room and asked what he was doing in the car with Carrie Vulpe, the answer he came up with was, "She said she owned a Jaguar, and I'd never driven one."

Daniel stands up and considers the prison uniform they gave him: orange cotton pants and giant T-shirt, plastic orange flip-flops for shoes. He asks, "Do you think I could get something for my indigestion first?"

"Sorry," the woman says. She hooks her thumb in a belt loop. "You'll be out soon enough. You're not being charged."

"Then I don't have to call anyone? I can just leave?"

"You could," the officer says. She smiles again as if he'll be genuinely happy to hear, "But, your wife's already here. The girl you came in with used her phone call an hour ago."

Cu

Jacob waits for a night with no moon. After dinner, he kisses Louise and tells her he will be working in his study and will try not to wake her when he comes to bed. He climbs the stairs and lights the candles at the mahogany writing table; after building the house for Louise—2nd largest single home in Bristol, \$11,000.00—he ran out of money and couldn't afford to wire the 3rd floor for electricity. He sits and folds his hands in the fragile filigree of the candles' glow, waiting.

The desk belonged to his father, and Jacob thinks of him as he stares into the darkness beyond the westward window. His father, Jackson, was the better man, and that's why Jacob named his son after his father; Jackson Sr. never said a derogatory word about anyone, never complained when he took sick at the age of 51 and died 3 years later. Jackson had been just 9 years old when the war had finally ended, had stood in the dirt on Main and watched Doc Butler return on the train with the instruments he had used to amputate Stonewall Jackson's arm in Chancellorsville 2 years before.

10 years later, when out-of-towners interested in the railroad began to buy land again, Jackson took the cash the sale of his own father's farm brought and invested. At that time, the jewelry and watch repair was just Jackson's hobby, something he worked over in the cellar, but by the time Jacob turned of an age to learn the trade, his father had already amassed an inventory of gold and silver and loose gems and opened a narrow storefront on Main he called Polk & Sons, always believing he'd have more than one boy to teach the arts of bronzing baby shoes and setting diamonds. He'd built the shop into a

place known for its intricate engraving and excellent selection, a place where everyone in Blountville and Papermill and Kingsport, as well as the Bristols, came to buy, but when all that talk about more railroads turned to hush and no one new came along needing engagement rings or cuff links—and when his father died and all his old-money customers followed—all that silver began to tarnish under the glass. And, now, Jacob knows he won't live to teach Jackson Jr. any of the lessons his father taught him—not how to engrave a wedding ring, and certainly not how to live an honest life.

Hours later and a long while after Jacob hears Louise shut the bedroom door for the night, he takes off his boots and slips down the stairs, out the kitchen door, and to the barn, where he's already saddled his quarterhorse, Penny, a coppery mare with a white stripe between her eyes. Jacob rides hard through the trees, keeping out of sight of the road. The air carries a cool breeze, and a sour taste collects in his mouth, wrought by the strong, brassy scent of the pines. He rides 6 miles, crouched low over Penny's mane to avoid branches, scared she will miss a step in the pitch-black and spill him, but she never does; she senses what he cannot see. Just before the crossroads to State St., he pulls hard on the reins and considers where to tie the mare—he could put her with the other gentlemen's horses behind the Nickel House Hotel and Saloon, but there's the chance that someone will recognize Penny, and, tomorrow, no one must say he was on State St. tonight. Jacob opts to tie her in the trees where she stands, and he creeps behind the row of stores on the VA side, the key to Polk & Sons salted away in his vest pocket and the brass-handled riding crop tucked up his coat sleeve.

Sc

Daniel watches his wife suck in her cheek, same as she's always done when she's trying to swallow her anger. He hasn't seen Mairi in almost four months, not since April, when she'd still tried to convince him to patch up the marriage and said, in the middle of the bagel shop on State St. no less, *I want another child, I want us to have another child...* He couldn't stand to look at her when she begged him for another baby. He couldn't stand how angry it made him for her to ask—they'd had a child, and she'd turned off that child's respirator without waiting for him. Now, Mairi says nothing even as she parks their—no, her—Explorer in front of the blue house on Moore St. and takes her keys out of the ignition. He thinks how her expression makes her face appear even more gaunt. It's at least part of the reason he didn't say *stop* when Nora came back to his motel room the night after the funeral and lay down beside him. Everything about Nora held the promise of sturdiness—the thickness of her hair; the warmth of her hands; the flushed muscles of her thighs. Such the opposite of Mairi's lace-yellow hair, pale skin, and thin lips. Why had he been struck so dumb by these fragile features when they met? Mairi had just been starting her doctorate when Daniel had less than a year left, and he'd never have met her if they hadn't ended up at the same shelf in the NYU library. He'd come around the corner just as she was climbing the ladder propped against the stacks, and when he saw her tottering on an upper rung in high heels, he'd wanted to grasp her waist and hold her steady. He'd wanted to carry her books, hold his jacket over her in the rain, tuck her hands in his coat pockets on cold nights. It was painful to him,

almost torturous, not to touch her in that moment. He pretended to be searching the shelves as he waited for her to step down the ladder. When she did, she smiled those delicate lips and said, “I know who you are. I’m doing bones, too. See?” She held up the book she’d retrieved, a text on feminist approaches to Viking gravesites. That’s all it took; she moved into his shotgun apartment on Beadle St., and he married her after 3 months, once she’d returned from gathering tooth morphology data in Norway.

Later, much later, he’d realize that she was interested in Vikings because they’d been the mascot of TN High.

Just after the wedding, Daniel sat beside her in the new OB-GYN’s office while the doctor explained how Mairi should never have been prescribed a diaphragm, given the shape of her cervix. He sat transfixed, staring at the broken clock on the doctor’s desk as its gold second hand ticked in place. Afterward, they stood tottering on the subway, heading to his—no, their—apartment in Brooklyn, and he promised her they could work this out, that she’d get to finish school.

But, Mairi didn’t need his promises; she wasn’t fragile. Not at all. When Daniel left for a conference in Mexico City, she did what her friends and family had told her she’d do when she first left Bristol: she went home. As Daniel boarded the plane, she waved one hand and stroked her belly with the other; then she took a cab to Beadle St., packed their belongings, called the movers, drove south, and bought the Colonial on the TN side, six houses down from her parents.

Why hadn’t he left her then?

Sitting in her Explorer outside his shabby apartment, Daniel now considers the fact that every time he looked at her after she left NY, all he could see was her packing those boxes, handing in those apartment keys, and driving away, her belly grazing the steering wheel. He'd never bothered to consider how she must have felt giving up her studies and returning to Bristol after all those years—with all those voices ringing in her ears, chanting *You'll be back*. He just complained about the smallness of King College, left her at home every summer when he flew to Guatemala, and ignored the fact she never again mentioned Viking gravesites.

Mairi reaches for her purse. "I'm coming upstairs to get those papers now."

"We don't need to sign those today," Daniel says.

Mairi clenches the steering wheel. "Exactly how many more teenage girls would it take before we *need* to sign them?"

Daniel notices Mairi's fingernails have grown again and are neatly polished the lightest shade of gold. When she'd checked into Woodridge 3 weeks after their son's funeral, they were bitten to the quick. "I'm sorry."

"Aren't we both?" Mairi drops her keys into her lap and stares beyond the windshield.

Rb

Behind the snack bar, the ice maker hums, the dishwasher swishes, and Nora and Emil watch the morning news on the 10-inch B&W with Wakefield. The tube's going

and the picture flickers, all the images tinged a pulsing red. Madeleine Mapp's 10th grade photo appears on the screen, followed by a clip of a VA city cop walking behind Paul MacKenzie and his best friend, Anthony Green—a black kid, Nora knows, who usually sits the bench. The boys aren't cuffed, but the cop keeps his hands on the boys' backs until they're in the patrol car. The newscaster's voiceover trills: *Family members say the VA High athletes in question have agreed to speak to local police.* Nora touches her belly, as if she could calm the faint tug there—a dropped feeling like the one she gets when she takes a hill too fast.

“See?” Wakefield points at the screen, his Rolex askew on his wrist. “See?”

Sn

I told you, I was born in Norfolk. My father did this, too, I said, and my grandfather, for that matter.

No, not on the train; are you kidding?

Granddad was a blacksmith back when it was still Norfolk & Western and they still had a yard in Bristol. Worked nonstop 'round the year—in the heat waves and the rain and the snow, and they did have snow back then. Got so cold on him that his jacket buttons cracked when he tried to fasten them. I've got this photograph he left in the family Bible. 1933, and all the guys standing on the tracks in front of a caboose with a sign hung on it reading *10 Consecutive Years Without a Reportable Accident.* 25 men in that painting, and almost half of them were black. Sure, all the black guys have to work

the yard and are crouched in a line on their knees in front, and the white guys wear suits and stand in a line behind them like they could kick them if they felt the urge. Still, almost half of them were black, and Bristol always was divided about allegiances in the war, you know.

Now, though, that place is so white you could write on it.

Ge

Emil can't help but hug Nora's waist on the Harley now; she's bending so hard into the curves of King College Rd., he could reach out and touch the pavement. The back of her T-shirt is still wet from her suit underneath, and Emil leans against it, dizzy with her smell—a potent fusion of coconut-flavored sunscreen and Cl. He wants to shout in her ear for her to slow down, but she's wearing her helmet and wouldn't hear him even if he dared to admit he was scared. He just hangs on for dear, dear life and tries not to lose his eyeglasses to the wind.

When Nora turns onto 421, heading toward the lake, she speeds up. The bike hums like a semiconductor. She passes Buck's Bait, the turn-off for Laurel Marina, the bridge over Holston Lake. She turns onto small neighborhood roads so fast he cannot catch the names on the street signs. He shuts his eyes and doesn't open them until she lays tread, finally, at the end of a long driveway.

Emil adjusts his glasses and gazes downhill, confused, at the strange double A-frame—two triangular buildings, the rear one towering over the front. The tree canopy is

thick and the windows are dark with shadows. All he can discern is that the house is old and unkempt; shingles hang from the pair of roofs, and the wood has taken on the dinginess of coal. A steep, graying staircase juts from its side and winds, turn after turn, down the hill, emptying onto a short pier at the water's edge.

Nora hops off her bike. He follows her down the gravel drive, hoping he doesn't have to climb down that staircase, and stands behind her when she knocks at the door.

Brian Blanton answers. He's naked to the waist, wearing only a pair of gray swim trunks and holding a can of Budweiser. He swirls his beer and says, "Do you know the Nazi Polka?"

Bi

Nora has a bad feeling. The landscape around the Blanton lake house makes her dizzy: the tangle of pines and laurels, the steep gravel driveway, the darkness under the rickety staircase. Nothing different, nothing out of the ordinary, but plenty of dark places to hide. Brian's had the run of the house since his father lost it in the divorce and his mother sobbed on about how the bad memories had given her an ulcer and swore she'd never set foot in it again. But, Nora hasn't been here since Brian's girlfriend dumped him the night after graduation and he threw the deck chairs off the balcony 1-by-1 and kicked a good 1/4 of the senior class out at 3:15 A.M. Now, she knows she won't feel better until she gets inside and finds nothing but the usual mess of empty liquor bottles and fried chicken buckets. She's just following that yanking in her gut, but she can't say why it's

drawing her to Blanton rather than Paul MacKenzie. She's known Brian since kindergarten, and she knows he is just high-strung and all-talk, and she knows the one time someone actually took him up on his dare to fight at the Dumpster behind Vance Junior High, he got a nosebleed and threw up before the other kid even got there.

Still, Brian's been getting more reckless since that night after graduation, and he's made enough rough passes at Nora to prove any number of accidents could occur when he's drunk.

Nora leans against the door and edges one foot into the foyer. She's close enough to smell Brian's breath—an old, fleshy odor that makes her queasy. She smiles anyhow and says, “Where's Keith? He told us to come by to swim.”

Brian tilts his head back and empties the beer. A drop of sweat dribbles down the center of his chest, and he looks like hell: bloodshot eyes; a pink, wrinkled sleep print on his cheek. He swallows and crushes the empty can, makes like he's going to throw it at Emil, then drops it in an umbrella stand beside the door. “I don't know where the fuck Keith is. Ask the Kraut.”

Nora stares hard at Emil and mouths *No*. The foreign boy pushes his glasses up his nose and says, “I didn't find Keith in his room. He said some things last night about coming here, I think.”

Nora is getting impatient. She pulls off her T-shirt and snaps her bathing suit straps, places a hand on Brian's chest, and strolls into the house. “Take me out on the boat.”

“Hey, it’s a mess. Wait a minute,” Brian says. But, Nora’s already in the den, considering the heaps of blankets on the couches, the burnt logs in the fireplace, and the piles of garbage bags on the kitchen counter. She can tell Brian’s been crashing here for a while, maybe all summer—a half-dozen pizza boxes are stacked on the coffee table, red plastic cups strewn around a spent keg, a dark water ring on the carpet.

The whole house is thick with heat and stinks all the worse for it, and Nora calls, “Where’s the A.C.?”

“It’s broken,” Brian says.

Nora knows her way around; she knows the bedrooms are located beyond the hallway leading to the rear A-frame. She heads in that direction, calling, “I’ll get the keys.”

“They’re not in there,” Brian hollers, but Nora keeps going, determined to check the bedrooms just to quiet the twang in her gut. “Emil needs a swimsuit.” She knows her voice is pitched, but she figures Brian is too hungover, maybe too drunk already, to notice. He stops at the kitchen for another Budweiser. In the hallway, she loses sight of him.

All the windowshades are drawn in the rear of the house. When Nora tries the lights in Brian’s parents’ old bedroom, she finds the bulbs dead. The room is almost too clean, she thinks. Nothing strewn about. No laundry on the floor. No underwear hanging from the ceiling fan. Only the bed is unmade, the sheets coiled at its foot.

Seeing the bed makes Nora think of Daniel. She wonders if he’s seen the news today, if he’s trying to phone her. She wonders if he feels as sick as she feels just now.

Back here, she can smell the lake—a fertile odor of soaked weeds and dead bugs embedded in the carpet.

The closet, too, is empty. Bare hangers swing on the rod.

Nora strides across the hallway to the second bedroom, the one Brian and his brothers shared until the older Blanton brothers went away to college and stopped coming around. Two bunk beds anchor the room, all unmade, too, from whoever had sex in them last. A slew of T-shirts, wet jeans, muddy Asics Gels, and Bic lighters cover the floor. The tang of pot hovers in the air, and she spies Brian's bowl resting on a rung of the bunk ladder.

If only Madeleine were passed out on one of the beds, Nora could quit worrying and go find Daniel.

The only thing that strikes her as strange is the stack of water skis in the corner of the room; she wonders why they aren't in the hold of the yacht.

Nora wants to climb the stairs to the loft bedroom of the rear A-frame before she gets on the boat, but when she turns around, Brian's blocking the door to the hallway. He points at her bathing suit, its red fabric still dark in places that haven't dried. "You've already been swimming," he says.

When Nora gets nervous, which isn't often, her mouth fills with the taste of chalk. "I told you, I wanted to go skiing." She places a hand on his shoulder, leans in, tries to avoid his beery breath, and says, "Come on, I know you want to see that foreign kid eat the water."

Brian doesn't fall for it though; too many lawyers in his family. He asks, "Why aren't you at the Club?"

Nora's about to say she called in sick when she spots something caught underneath the bedroom door. She shuts it on Brian and picks up the white bikini top, its edges yellowed from wear. A salt wave breaks in her gut, and she turns around just in time to throw up in the bedroom trash can. Brian opens the door while she's still hunched over, and she stuffs the bikini bra into the front of her shorts. She wipes her mouth and looks over her shoulder at Brian. The scar on his forehead puckers when he frowns, and he looks genuinely concerned when he says, "Jesus, girl, how much of Gaven's vodka did *you* drink last night?"

Nora wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and mumbles, "I think I need to go home."

Ta

Who is Madeleine Mapp?

In Madeleine's 10th grade photograph, she's a red-haired girl with green eyes who wears a cross studded with rubies, her birthstone—a gift from her father on her confirmation. Because Nora knows everyone, she knows Madeleine took drama, starred in the annual school play for the past 2 years, played clarinet in the band, and sang in the choir at First Presbyterian, but they certainly didn't run in the same crowd. Madeleine was 2 years behind Nora in school, and while Nora spent most of her time at diving

practice or with the Matchman brothers and guys like Keith and Brian—always preferring the company of boys who didn't blink when she jumped off Badaman's Rock—Madeleine went to flag meetings, 1/2 hour prayer circles held around the TN High flagpole before school. She kept a Bible in her locker, and she could be found bowing her head and silently moving her lips before lunch in the cafeteria.

For the past 2 years, Madeleine didn't even wear a bathing suit when she came to the pool with the Beaumont children; however, something in her changed this summer. She showed up for the Memorial Day opening in a red one-piece with a plunging V-neckline. The other church girls who used to come with her disappeared, and ½-a-dozen boys from both sides of town came instead. Most of them were 1-or-2-time guests, but Madeleine had been bringing Paul MacKenzie about once a week all summer. In early July, when she started wearing her hair loose, the red tendrils uncoiling in the sun, the rumors that she'd slept with MacKenzie began. Nora recalls wondering back as early as June how Madeleine had even met him, since it was rare for a student at TN High to be dating a student from VA High, especially when 1 has money and 1 doesn't.

And, Madeleine had money. Or, her father did. He'd become the town hero when he made the deal in January to establish King Pharmaceuticals, saving over 100 jobs after the previous facility, a branch of Beecham, folded. It had been just one in a series of closings—not a single new member joined the Club this year, and tables at the 19th Hole that had been filled with Raytheon executives were empty this summer. But, in the few months since its opening, King Pharmaceuticals had snapped up over a dozen contracts for the manufacture of pricey cardiac and neurological medications, and Dr.

Mapp had already found ways to duck taxes on his profits; last month, he donated a new, \$14,000.00 organ to First Presbyterian. Busy as he's been, Nora figures if Dr. Mapp has noticed his only daughter's strange, new behavior, he certainly hasn't had the time to put a stop to it.

Pb

Jacob lets himself in via the back door of his jewelry shop. The antique odor of the place always reminds him of his father. When Jacob was very young, he thought it was the cash he imagined piled in the safe that made the shop smell the way it did—rife with the faintly metallic odor money has, like pencil shavings. Now, he knows his father kept only enough money on hand to make change. The rest went into the railroads, just numbers scratched into his father's books.

The shop is dark but for light cast by the nearest streetlamp, a swath refracted by the glass countertops of the jewelry cases. It doesn't matter—Jacob stands in the doorway between the back office and the showroom only long enough to make certain no one is standing on the street out front. He turns around and crouches in front of the safe, a key-turn box as old as the century.

Almost a month ago, Jacob bought the lot of 3-dozen, 2-carat brilliants from the Philadelphia dealer, Mr. Valentine, who'd been selling to Polk & Sons since 1901 when Jackson Sr. found a fake in a lot of pearls he'd purchased off a man in Knoxville. Years later, when Jackson took sick, he had made Jacob swear only to buy gem stock from Mr.

Valentine. He'd obeyed, even if it meant Mr. Valentine knew him well enough to crook an eyebrow when he took the entire lot of 2-carat diamonds...it would have been more suspicious had he'd bought them from someone else.

Jacob finally set the first of the brilliants a week ago in a money clip of all things, commissioned by Mayor Plumb of Abingdon, a bachelor in his 60s. When Jacob presented the clip and discreetly wrote the price on the attached business card, the way his father always did, Mayor Plumb plunked \$400.00 on the counter, smiled his dead, gray teeth, and said, "Easy come, easy go." It was what Jacob had been waiting for—someone to purchase one of the diamonds, someone boisterous enough to boast to a potential thief.

Jacob sets aside the brass-handled riding crop for later and sets to picking the safe with the awl from his barn. He knows the lock will break easily enough, given its age and simple design, but he makes deliberate, slow work of the job, careful to scratch up the metal as much as possible. He mumbles: *...all?...why all?...half, no, not good enough, all...and what of the Polk sons now?*

Even before Jacob expects it, the lock springs. He adjusts his wool gloves and is about to reach into the safe when a muffled thump from the street gives him pause.

Sb

On the front porch, Emil's still considering the swiftly darkening sky when the first few rain drops splash the lenses of his eyeglasses and Nora stumbles out of the lake

house, Brian calling for her to wait. She doesn't stop. Her face is splotted red as though she's been weeping. Emil tries to catch her by the elbow, but she sprints up the gravel driveway, aiming for her motorcycle in a way that makes him know she's about to leave without him. He goes breathless trying to catch up, but he manages to swing his leg over the seat before she swerves into a tipsy U-turn in the middle of the street. As she gains speed, Emil looks up just long enough to catch the name of the street this time: Friendship Rd.

The rain thickens into a steady downfall. It is a cold shower with large, heavy drops—Emil feels them almost individually, as if each were a pellet of Pb. The neighborhood roads quickly fill with water. Nora cuts her speed, but not as much as Emil would like; he cringes at the wobble of the back tire. When she turns onto 421, he notices how few cars are on the highway now—how reduced his vision is by the rain. It still isn't 12:00, but it's dark as sunset. Like he's scared she might, Nora increases her speed once they hit the wider road, and Emil keeps his eyes open this time and peeks over her shoulder as if watching the asphalt ahead will keep them on it.

At the same time, he's wondering what happened inside the lake house to upset Nora. The way Brian keeps calling him a Kraut and a Nazi is nothing new to Emil. Since he's arrived, he's been misrecognized and called every derogatory European diminutive there could be—on a vacation with his host family to Savannah, GA, a gas station attendant along the way even mistook his olive skin called him a *spic*. Still, Emil senses something different in the way Brian persists, as if it's not meant to hurt him, but to remind everyone else of something ugly.

Emil doesn't get to finish thinking about it. When Nora crests the hill beside Laurel Marina, Emil sees the tree branch beside the road split and fall into an electrical line. The cable snaps from the post and writhes in the air, casting arcs of silvery-blue sparks. He's never seen anything like it; it is so wonderful to him that his heart clenches.

Then, Emil feels Nora cutting her speed too fast and the back tire fishtailing. As the motorcycle veers to the left, he catches a glimpse of her gripping the handlebar. He is only thinking of how small her hands are—her fist not much larger than a plum—and already lifting his leg and dragging her by the waist when the bike tilts into the pavement and they both somersault into the ditch.

Covered in mud, Emil waits for his breath to come back. He looks at Nora lying a couple of meters away and realizes he's missing his glasses. He pats the wet ground around him and calls, "Can you get up?"

Nora doesn't answer.

Emil's vision is so poor, he can't see clear detail more than 20 centimeters in front of his face. His jeans are torn. Blood surfaces at a scrape on his knee, and he's reminded how quickly things change—how the dissolution of liquids and solids and gases in the blood transforms its composition by the millisecond. He winces, and his legs shake when he stands. Before he can get to Nora's side, though, she sits up, takes off her helmet, and throws it at the road. Her hair has fallen out of its braid, and she shoves both muck-covered hands in it and starts to cry.

Emil backs up a few steps to give her space. He wipes the rain off his face and asks, "Are you hurt?" When she doesn't answer after a few seconds, Emil squints,

climbs the small ditch, and rolls the motorcycle off the road. Still, no cars have passed. He begins looking for his glasses again, crawling back and forth from the road to the ditch. The rain falls steadily on. He loses sight and sound of Nora until she's standing over him some minutes later, holding something in her hand and saying, "Here they are."

Emil wipes his glasses on the tail of his T-shirt. "Thanks."

Nora has her back to him, looking across the road where the cable hangs on the ground, still now but for the sway of the rain. She says, "We should go down to the marina and tell someone, I guess. That's dangerous."

"Brian has no knowledge of that woman you are looking for."

"What do you know?" Nora turns around.

"What's that?" Emil points at the white fabric sticking out of Nora's cut-offs.

V

As soon as Daniel opens the car door and stands up, he feels nauseous again. He tries to talk Mairi out of coming upstairs, but she insists, saying, "You left, not me. The least you can do is let me finish this before another night passes." She follows him up the stairs of the blue house. Daniel feels so ill he shakes, and he drops the keys before he can get the lock undone.

"I guess you didn't sleep so well last night, huh?"

"Let's just not talk about—anything," Daniel says. When he gets the door open, he points at the papers on the coffee table. His mouth fills with that familiar metallic-

tasting spit that always reminds him of a meteorite he once dug up in Tikal, and he knows he is about to vomit. He says, “I’ll be right back,” and heads to the bathroom. He leans over the rusted toilet bowl, waiting. But, he hasn’t eaten in so long, nothing comes up. He keeps coughing and spitting, hoping he can get enough acid out of his stomach to make him feel better.

Minutes later, he finds Mairi standing at his dresser, her hair tinged gold by the windowlight. He’s reminded of how he used to call her Freyja after the Norse fertility goddess, how he stopped when he finished his degree and joined her in Bristol. Mairi’s opened the drawers, and he sees the familiar plastic bags and linen handkerchiefs strewn across the top of the dresser. Mairi turns around with the brittle book—in ungloved hands, he notices—and asks, “What have you done?”

In

After Nora drops Emil at home and before she takes the bikini top to the court house, she rides into VA and out to the country and into the trailer park where Gaven Matchman lives. She was lucky; only the Harley’s shock absorber was scratched in the spill.

Gaven’s trailer is tidy as usual—he’s compulsive about uncluttered surfaces, and there’s nothing but a stack of coasters on the coffee table and fresh vacuum grooves on the carpet. In the bedroom, his mirrored ceiling reflects the neatly made bed, his Doc Marten boots in a row at its foot. This is what she’s always loved about Gaven—he’s

kinky enough to have a mirrored ceiling and anal enough to Windex it once a week. She finds him on the back porch, feeding a stray cat that's missing a leg. "C'mere little cripple kitty," he says. "Come get this tuna before I kick you."

"Four-legged cats want no truck with you?" Nora says.

Gaven's wearing a Saigon Kick T-shirt and a shiny dragon pendant. "What's up, Trixie?"

"Seen the news today?"

"Lost a body at the pool?"

"Yeah." Nora sits on the porch railing and watches the cat slide the tuna can around on the step. "I found this in Blanton's lake house."

Gaven leans over and glances at the bikini top, says, "That's not hers."

"How do you know?"

"What's that, like an A-cup? Please, she's bustier than that."

Nora stares at Gaven, at the sharpness of his chin, wondering what to think. She can't stop imagining what's in the hold of Blanton's yacht. The cat has finished the tuna and is crying meows over the tin.

"That girl's going to turn up, and it'll turn out she's just been shacking up with some football player and having a regular gay old time on Daddy's credit card."

"I don't know. I have a bad feeling."

"Residual family guilt, that's why," Gaven says. "You decide what to do with those rocks yet?"

"No. I might sit on them a while."

“Just don’t sit on them so long they get stuck up your ass.”

“I’ve got to go,” Nora says.

“I’m still driving you to Nashville Saturday, right?”

The glass in the back door reflects Nora’s image, and she considers how easy it was to erase all traces of the wreck this morning—just dropped off the foreign kid, washed her face, and re-braided her hair.

B

At the courthouse, Nora asks for her mother’s old friend, Pete Purchase. A woman named Sherry at the front desk leads her to his desk, where he’s filling out paperwork. Nora hasn’t seen Officer Purchase since her mother’s funeral, but he looks the same—still hasn’t cut his now-gray ponytail or taken off his VA High graduation ring, a heavy piece set with an amethyst. His knuckles are swollen, and one pinky finger is permanently bent. Her mother used to say the same thing every time she saw him: “There goes a good man with bad arthritis.” Purchase had been the one to let Nora know they’d found her mother’s car, her body inside. The way he teared up when he told her made her wonder ever since if maybe there’d been something between him and her mother all those years ago after her father drowned.

After Purchase blesses Nora out for removing evidence from the Blantons’ lake house, he drops the bikini top in a Ziploc bag and says, “I’m not on this case. I’ll give it to Wright. He’ll have her parents come by to ID it.”

“What about Paul and Anthony?”

Purchase clasps his ruined fingers on top of the desk. “Nobody’s charged them with anything, Nora. I think they’ve gone home.”

“Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe it’s not hers, but—”

“Look, I get it. I get why you’re upset.” Purchase clears his throat. “Been a hell of a year, huh, Pumpkin?”

Nora’s not going to sit around while he tries to lay some fatherly chat on her; she stands up and says, “I have to be somewhere.”

“Just calm down, all right?” Purchase fumbles with the lid on an amber pill bottle. “Would you look at this? They know it’s for arthritis, and they still put a child-safety cap on it. I was just going to tell you I booked someone you might remember last night.”

Nora leans over the desk and opens the bottle. “I remember many people.”

“It was a mistake. We let him go this morning. I didn’t realize who he was until Sherry told me when I brought him in. That boy’s father—the one who got hurt at your pool last year.” Purchase peers at one of the files on his desk. “Daniel Clifford?”

“It’s not my pool,” Nora says. “I just quit.”

Hf

Any almost-human, half-decent feeling of regret Daniel had for his wife in the car disappears the moment he sees that she’s been rummaging through his drawers. Is this

why she insisted on coming upstairs? What did she think she'd find? Why is it so difficult to separate her presence from his?

"Just put it down and forget you saw it," Daniel says.

Mairi does no such thing, of course. She sits on the edge of his bed and cradles the codex in her lap, using a fold in her skirt to cover her hand as she shifts the pages. "I knew you took those bones, but, Daniel—"

Would she report him? How can he get out of this?

"You came up here to get these, right?" He picks up the divorce papers and searches his breast pocket for a pen.

"Daniel, this is wrong. Daniel, you can't *not* give this to the Institute."

Why does she always speak in double negatives? He sits on the couch and lays the papers flat on the coffee table, pen poised over the X. "Just stop it. Please. Just stop saying my name."

Mairi looks up from the codex, her eyes full of a pitiable effort. He thinks the last thing she wants is for him to sign these papers; he thinks she is still trying to understand him. It makes him so tired. Finally, Mairi says, "What are you going to do with this?"

"I'm going to translate it. I've already started."

"You can't translate this alone."

Daniel glares at his wife. "I don't need your help."

"I didn't mean me," she says. "I meant the Institute. You owe this to them." She spews forth in her high-pitched voice about about the other three surviving codices, as if he doesn't know—how they were essentially stolen as well, taken out of Guatemala in

the 19th century and never even documented until years later when they resurfaced in Europe. One of them was even found in a trash can. And, they are named after the cities where they were re-discovered; still, they remain in those places under glass: Dresden, Madrid, Paris. Even the fourth text, merely a fragment named the Grolier codex, is in a museum in Mexico, and it's not on display to the public. Daniel doesn't need a lecture from Mairi to know this one belongs to the *Instituto de Antropología e Historia*; that it should be in the University of San Carlos. 222 square miles of Tikal, less than 1/8 of it yet fully excavated, and he managed to find the one codex hidden from Spaniard priests. Daniel isn't going to tell Mairi, or anyone else yet, that this text is different from the others—that it was transcribed by one single clerk rather than several, or that it has nothing to do with astronomy or the Maya calendar.

“You don't even have the resources to accurately date this,” Mairi is saying now.

“Just stop it. You have no idea what you are talking about. Just—” He feels a headache coming on, his thoughts sticking on this word: *just, just, just*.

Mairi reaches for the strip of linen and begins re-wrapping the codex. “You're right. Don't be angry with me. I just want you to be able to go back to Guatemala. Don't you miss it?”

“What'd you think you'd find in there?”

Mairi glances about the apartment. Daniel wonders how pathetic it looks to her: the bare walls and scuffed wood floors; the ridiculous floral sofa and mismatched bed linen. “Honestly? I just wanted to see if you had enough clothing. I still have boxes of your things.”

What should he say? What would be fitting? He still holds the divorce papers flat on the coffee table, and he knows it is right to sign them, but he feels he should be making a less ridiculous moment of it. Still, is that possible? Hasn't everything already been said? "I feel like this should be happening differently," he says.

"No." Mairi clutches her purse in her lap. "I'm ready for it to be done. I sold the house."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm still figuring it out," she says. When Daniel looks at her this time, he realizes how wrong he has been today; it's not want but relief, something close to joy, moving within her eyes. He signs the indicated lines on the papers and folds them. When Mairi stands up from the bed and briefly trails her fingers across her belly, she doesn't have to say anything for him to recognize the meaning behind that familiar, unconscious gesture. He holds out the papers and says, "You're pregnant."

Se

On Wednesday, the twin towns of Bristol, TN, and Bristol, VA, are papered with red, Xeroxed flyers—each one stamped with Madeleine Mapp's 10th grade photo underneath the word *MISSING!* Nora spots them on telephone poles and store windows when she rides to King College, wondering who stayed up all night to post them.

I have to practice, Nora thinks. I can't help this. I've got to think about Saturday. At the pool, she stretches longer than usual to loosen her muscles and shakes

her head as if she could really get rid of the sight of Mrs. Clifford's Explorer parked in front of Daniel's apartment yesterday. She fouls more than ½ her dives. She quits when she lands face-first on a simple back-straight.

And, she's still toweling off beside the bleachers when William Foster Wakefield III opens the pool door in his street clothes, a stack of red flyers in his hand, and says, "You don't answer your phone now?"

Ni

Jacob stands in the doorway between the office and the showroom, watching the men from the Nickel House Hotel jostle Cecil between them on the sidewalk. The black boy appears inebriated, laughing along with the men as they shove him back and forth within their circle. Doc Blanton is there, and so is William, the boy who works for him. Eli Everhart, the manager of the passenger station, is there, too, holding a pewter mug in his hand and sloshing ale onto the sidewalk. The fourth man is a stranger Jacob doesn't recognize, an older, beardless gentleman wearing a navy suit. He stands apart from the others, but he's watching them drag the black boy away from the door of the Nickel House and into the street. Jacob steps backward, fearful they might discern his silhouette in the shop. Still, he can't stop watching: he can't get back to his plan until they are gone, and he wants to know what they are going to do to the boy. All the men are speaking save Cecil, but Jacob can't make sense of the words.

They've crossed to the sidewalk in front of Polk & Sons, and Cecil drops to his knees as if to just make them stop moving him. They fall quiet for a few seconds until Eli Everhart laughs, tilts Cecil's head back, and pours ale from his mug onto the boy's face. "Come now, I've bought you a drink," Eli says. "Don't be rude." Cecil keeps his mouth closed, and the ale spills about him—across his close-shorn head and down his shoulders. Cecil says nothing, his eyes shut tight.

Other familiar townsmen come out of the saloon, but they merely glance at what's happening across the street and move on in the direction of their horses. The sight of them walking away makes Jacob wish briefly that Louise were here to see this, to answer her when she says *Maybe you should be more sociable with the other businessmen*.

Jacob stands riveted in the shadows of his office, watching the scene still. He knows the boy could not have entered the Nickel House without these men insisting he be let in with them, and this harassment has probably gone on for hours.

Eli looks angry now, still holds Cecil down by his shoulders and shouts, "Someone get this dark boy another drink!"

But, Doc Blanton and William have stumbled away by now, as if bored. They are heading back toward the door of the Nickel House, but Jacob can't really take his eyes off the stranger's odd still-ness as he watches Eli bully the boy. Finally, the stranger unpockets his pistol, rushes forward, and brings it down on the back of Cecil's head.

Ar

Alone in his host parents' house on Georgia Ave., Emil lies in his attic bedroom and reads. He tries to concentrate on the explications of recent innovations in nuclear fusion at Darmstadt, Germany, where physicists are bombarding Pb targets with Ni, but he's distracted. He can't quit thinking about being with Nora yesterday, how she wept in the rain and showed him the bathing suit she believed belonged to the girl they saw on the news. Emil had tried to tell Nora that Keith had more than likely been with Brian since he left the pool yesterday and there was no way he'd have had time to make the girl disappear, but Nora ignored him and walked over to the motorcycle. She assessed the scratches to its shock absorber and somehow got the engine to ignite. She said nothing until she dropped him off, and then only, "Please don't say anything to Keith."

Emil rests his book flat on his chest. The silence of the attic carries the hum of the bare bulb above his bed; he stares into the yellow light until it spots his eyes. He knows it is ridiculous for him to be thinking of Nora when he flies back to Poland in less than three weeks, but it is something he knows he couldn't control even if he tried. He can admit that his affection for her is based on things of such little substance: the fact that he has not yet seen her smile and wonders if he could be the one to make her do so; the fact that she seems so alone, unwilling to cling to anyone or anything but her own shoulders.

It's already ¼ to 4:00. Every hour that slips by is 3,600 seconds Emil is not making use of his time left. He swings his legs over the bed, grabs his jacket, and heads downstairs to retrieve the keys to his host parents' Volvo.

Mn

They both did. Patrol cars with candy racks ablaze parked on either side of the sign. They argued about jurisdiction. It was ridiculous—traffic cut off so everyone had to detour over West Mary St. bridge, only they're trying to get a good look first, and the three of us from the train standing there with our hands in our pockets, waiting for someone to tell us what to do, but there's these two black guys from the VA side and this white guy from TN with his arms folded, acting like their guns aren't all the same size.

And, Gary was getting pissed, saying *Bastards have nothing to do and we're paying the price*. That's right, the conductor, and I think he really believes Norfolk Southern puts the sun up in the sky every morning; he was actually convinced he'd still get the lading to Knoxville on schedule. I know what he was thinking; he was thinking he'd be the engineer by the time we got back to Norfolk. I knew if the cops didn't decide something soon, Gary would get right in the middle of it. Well, it took another 20 minutes for them to decide to take us to the VA courthouse since it's right down the street and all—we could've walked there and back by the time they finally made up their minds—and they let a couple of the TN guys sit in on the questioning, but I think it was

really just so the VA guys could interrupt them every time they tried to get a word in edgewise.

The body was still there when the cops took us down the street.

I'm assuming the morgue has it now.

Right, they talked to us separately. And, I'm thinking the whole time *when are they going to let us call it in to HQ?* This goes on until a white guy with a silver ponytail and an amethyst ring—

I don't know. You just remember when a guy's wearing a purple ring.

So, he strolls into the room, and then it's all business; even the black guys who've been saying *don't let those crackers on the train pin this on you* finally shut the hell up. Purple ring tells the TN cops *y'all still have a girl to be looking for, don't you?* And the other VA cops leave without even being asked. At that point, I'm just annoyed, thinking I'm going to have to answer the same questions again. Wondering where I'm going to stay the night until this gets sorted out. Wondering who's doing what to my hoppers while I'm in here. Wondering a lot of useless shit because this new cop just says *The tracks are clear. I called it in for you. Sign this, get your coal, and get out of here.*

Thing is, as soon as I got a good look at him, I remembered him.

K

On Wednesday, Carrie Vulpe's desk still sits empty in the middle of Daniel's classroom. He wonders if he should have gone back to the courthouse to help her since

her family, he assumes, is in Chicago. He tries to focus and writes elaborate notes on race and physical anthropology across the chalkboard. He rolls out a pair of skeletons he borrowed from the biology department and asks, “Which one’s black?”

His students—all of them white—scribble away in their notebooks. It’s now just four boys and one other girl named Jenn whose accent is even more pronounced than the others; she calls the class *irkiology*. It’s Jenn who realizes what he’s just asked and says, “No way, Dr. Clifford, that’s racist.”

The only other student who occasionally speaks in class is the boy who sits in the back row, Gabe Short. He says, “Just talking about race isn’t racist.”

Jenn points her pencil at the skeletons. “All I know is that those two guys used to be people, and I bet they don’t appreciate standing up there on wheels and us talking about what color they were.”

“Race, not color. And, one of them’s a girl,” Gabe says.

“He’s right,” Daniel says. He wiggles the arm of the skeleton on his left. “Now, is Jane white or black?”

Gabe Short sticks his feet in the desk in front of his and crosses his arm. “That’s not fair.”

“Why not?”

“Well, wouldn’t this be a better exercise if it were two males or two females?”

“Believe it or not, we don’t have the widest selection of skeletons here at VI.”

Daniel stares at the yellowed cheekbone of the female and calls the remaining students to his desk. Waiting for the minutes to pass, he points out the subtle differences in the

skeletons and lists the things that can indicate differences in bone density. He figures if he just keeps plying the students with facts, he'll be okay; he just has to make it to Friday, when he gives the final examination. Afterward, he will have a few weeks without teaching responsibilities, and he can relax. Still, the more he shows his students in the skeletons, the more he thinks about the way a woman's pelvic bones shift during pregnancy.

Daniel wasn't planning on asking, but Mairi said yesterday she'd never tell him whose baby she's carrying.

At the end of the period, Daniel packs up his books while he waits for his students to leave, but Jenn hovers until the others have gone. "Do you have a question about the final?"

Jenn nods at Carrie's desk. "My cousin told me what happened to that weird girl."

"Oh."

"My cousin's in cop training. That's how come she knew."

Daniel takes a step backward and bumps into the female skeleton, sending it squeaking a few feet away. What would happen if he just ran for the door?

"I know that girl's odd and all, but I just can't believe somebody'd do something like that to another person."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"You know she got arrested for stealing a Jaguar, right? Don't you know? It was in the paper. My cousin told me all about it. That girl's boyfriend, or ex-boyfriend, I

guess, *gave* her that car. When she came down here without telling him, he reported it stolen. He just wanted to find out where she was.”

Daniel hears himself say, “How terrible.”

“I bet she’s not coming back,” Jenn says.

Daniel starts to relax, realizing the girl wouldn’t be talking to him if she knew he’d been involved in Carrie’s arrest—she wouldn’t risk her grade. “That would be a shame. Ms. Vulpe was doing very well in the class.”

Jenn clutches her copy of *Quest for the Past* to her chest and shrugs. “Well, I wouldn’t hang around if a guy like that knew where I was at. Besides, I heard she wasn’t all by herself when she got pulled over.”

P

Wakefield drops the stack of *MISSING!* flyers on a step of the bleachers. “I didn’t appreciate the message you left at my office last night.”

“You mean the closet where they keep the extra tennis balls?” Nora wrings the water out of her hair and reaches for her T-shirt.

“You’re the senior lifeguard. You can’t leave the Club now.”

“You’ve got time to figure out a sub for my swim classes. The pool’s still closed, right?” She nods at the stack of flyers.

“Don’t you think it looks a little suspicious?”

Nora balls the corner of her towel in her fist.

Wakefield reaches as if to catch her wrist. “Now, don’t—“

“Why don’t you just say what you really mean? We both know you aren’t here out of concern for me.”

“If you quit right now, it’ll look like the Club’s falling apart. Membership’s already down.”

“Membership’s down because everybody’s losing their jobs. That doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

Wakefield sits on the bleachers and rubs the blank space on his wrist where the Rolex would be, Nora knows, if he weren’t trekking around town, hanging flyers all day, afraid it might get scratched while trying to save his job. “I’ll give you \$2.00 more an hour.”

“You can’t afford it. I’m not going to stay, Wakefield. You know I don’t need the money.”

“I can’t convince you?”

“Stop asking.” Nora picks up a flyer and examines the photograph, a grainy black-and-white Xerox of Madeleine’s sophomore photo that makes her face appear flat, almost featureless.

“If they find her at the Club—“

“They won’t,” Nora says. “They’d have found her by now.”

“They brought the TN Bureau of Investigation. They’re moving the car.”

“That’s not a bad thing. Now it’s out of your hair.” Nora almost feels sorry for him, but she isn’t going to tell him about the bathing suit top she found at Brian Blanton’s lake house. What really hurts her these days is how she’s collecting more skeletons in her closet than her mother ever hung there.

Ba

Daniel hasn’t driven his Subaru Legacy in nearly a week; the engine pings and is in need of new spark plugs. He tunes out the noise and rides over the state line to Bristol Country Club. He’s passed the pool dozens of times since his son’s funeral, but he’s never stopped before, especially not to see Nora.

Does Nora think the place reminds him of his son? Probably, Daniel guesses. But, the truth is that he can’t even imagine his son there; when Mairi’s mother took them as guests, he always refused the invitation.

Yesterday afternoon, Daniel had stood at his bedroom window, putting the codex away and watching Mairi climb into her Explorer when he saw Nora on her motorcycle at the corner, her foot planted on the curb. Daniel knew it isn’t fair for her to be coping with a man who makes a new mess every day, much less a now-ex-wife parked in front of his blue house. Nora didn’t even lift the visor on her helmet before she sped away, and

he leaned his forehead on the window and decided to let her go before it became disastrous.

Does he still have time to catch her at the end of her shift? How will she take it when he tells her she shouldn't knock on his door anymore?

Daniel can't even get into the parking lot of BCC, however, because the entry is blocked with cones and *CAUTION* tape. He sees an officer sitting in a cruiser, guarding the entrance. The pool appears empty, the umbrellas above the lifeguard towers closed, and a pair of unmarked navy blue Crown Victorias are parked on either side of a gold VW in the parking lot, but Daniel isn't about to stop and ask what's happened. He turns around in Tara Hills and heads back in the opposite direction, hoping to find Nora safe at home.

Y

Jacob watches the stranger in the suit walk back into the Nickel House, followed by Eli Everhart. Cecil lies on his side in the gutter, but Jacob can't tell if the boy's unconscious or just staying on the ground to avoid another blow. Even if he were willing to leave the lockbox for another night, he can't appear on the street to help Cecil—the boy would remember later and say something, perhaps, about Jacob keeping unusual hours at the shop after the plan is finally complete.

It will bother him, however, not to learn the name and calling of the stranger. The man had the cruelest look on his face when he struck the boy; it wasn't the sneer Jacob expected, but the type of gentile smile with which one would greet an infant.

Given the streetlamp, Jacob can see the diaphanous veil of dust on top of the glass showcases. No matter how often he takes his handkerchief to the surfaces, the dust accumulates; it comes in with every customer who enters from the unpaved street. He removes his boots and slides across the wooden floor to stand against the north wall where he has a better view of Cecil's body. Waiting will complicate matters of returning to Louise without her curiosity being raised, but he knows he cannot safely continue until the boy rises to leave—or until someone removes him.

As Jacob waits in the shadows, he can't help but unpocket his handkerchief and wipe the countertop. Underneath the glass, his inventory of garnet pins and pendants rests on cushions in the display; it is his best-stocked case, as garnets have always been his favorite. He'd given one to his first wife, Evangeline, when he asked for her hand, and she had loved the unique ring, always proud to wear it amongst the other women. He'd catch her smiling at it, fingering the stone at First Presbyterian on Sundays. That was in 1902, though, and he was barely 21. When Evangeline took a fever and died not 2 years after their wedding, their 1st child still in her womb, he buried her in the garnet and vowed never to set another such stone in a ring, nevermind who might wish it. And, when he took his knee for Louise almost a decade ago, he took no special care in selecting a remnant diamond from the shop and setting it in a popular, quite traditional

band. Jacob loves Louise—admires her warmth and steadiness—but she has none of Evangeline’s brilliance.

Rn

Though Emil took Driver’s Ed. during his exchange year at TN High, he wasn’t allowed an American license and shouldn’t have taken his host parents’ Volvo; it wouldn’t matter, though, if Keith came home and found the car missing; he’d be proud of Emil for doing something so reckless.

It’s 4:07 p.m. Emil listens to talk of the missing girl on the A.M. radio; though he never knew Madeleine, her name is becoming very familiar. The radio station plays a statement Dr. Mapp made in front of the VA courthouse late last night:

She is our only child. She is a good—a wonderful—daughter, and she’s never once disobeyed curfew. For Officer Purchase to imply that our only daughter may have left the Beaumont children at the Country Club of her own accord is incredibly irresponsible, and we look forward to Detective Anderson taking over the case in TN. We know, we absolutely know, something very out of the ordinary has happened, and her mother and I beg of anyone who has seen her to contact us or... Emil’s been following the news, and he’s noticed 2 strange things: Dr. Mapp never says Madeleine’s name but only refers to her as his *daughter*, and Mrs. Mapp has yet to make a public appearance.

Emil doesn't know Nora's exact address, but Keith had pointed out the general direction of her home Monday night and said it was the only one behind the Drive-In. It takes him a while to find his way out of the adjoining neighborhood and onto the gravel drive. He's never seen such pines as the ones on Nora's land—trunks the size of oil barrels and enough room beneath the limbs to walk upright should he wish. The trees stand so thick he doesn't see the house until he passes the final bend and is upon it, a 3-story Victorian so disheveled he thinks he must be in the wrong place. It's as if he's stepped forward several decades, a time when all the occupants are long gone. A few of the bottom windows have been boarded over with black planks, and more than a few banisters from the porch railing lie scattered on the ground.

"What the devil?" Emil steps out of the car and finds himself testing the porch boards. He hears nothing inside when he tries the doorbell, and no one answers his knock. He leans against the glass and peers into the living room, where the furniture is nothing but shadows. Beneath the window, sunlight pools on a table; it too is dusty and cluttered: an oil lamp; a strewn deck of playing cards; a yellowed drawstring pouch, the sight of which causes Emil to conjure the smell of moth balls.

Once his eyes adjust to the dark, he spies a Rn detector plugged into an outlet beneath the stairs.

If Nora truly lives here, he wants to get her out.

Emil is just about to try the knob when a blue car halts in the gravel. He squints, shading his eyes with his hands and trying to catch sight of the driver.

Ra

Daniel takes the final bend of Nora's driveway so fast he almost crashes into the parked Volvo. On the porch, a boy in a suede jacket is peering into her foyer window, and he considers throwing the Subaru into reverse until he realizes the boy might describe his car to Nora. Daniel's never seen any of her friends from school; he's shocked at how young the boy appears to be, reminded that Nora's the same age.

Daniel opens his car door and calls, "She's not home?"

The boy shakes his head and begins walking toward Daniel's car. "She doesn't answer," he says. "This house is very dusty. I wondered that she really lived here."

What type of accent is that?

Daniel stands ½-in and ½-out of the car, a foot still planted on the floorboard for balance. "No, I—I knew her mother," Daniel lies. "The house was built by someone on that side of the family."

"She does not seem to be inside either."

"I thought you knew her?"

"I have not met the mother."

"No, Nora. Her mother's dead. I meant, if you knew Nora, you'd know that."

The boy keeps staring at the house. "Cancer?"

“Not quite.”

“Oh, well, I will not be prying. I only just met Nora by way of friends. I might see her later. I will say to her that you stopped by, if you tell me your name.”

“Dr. Clifford,” Daniel says. He immediately feels ashamed, thinking of the boy telling Nora he’d referred to himself so formally. He sticks out his hand. “I mean, I’m Daniel.”

“Emil.”

“Sorry?”

“Eeee-mil,” the boy says again. “It’s Polish.”

“Right. Well. You’re not going to wait here for her, are you?”

The boy no longer seems interested in Daniel. He faces the barn some 200 yards from the house and asks, “What’s in there?”

Cr

At the bike shop on Weaver Pk., Nora waits for Gaven’s friend to repair the dented chrome of her motorcycle’s shock absorber. She knows, without asking, that ordering another part is out of the question. She sits beside the coffee maker, flipping through a copy of *American Rider* and wincing at the blondes in red bikinis straddling the bikes. Occasionally Logan, the shop’s office manager, leans across the counter and

makes small talk. He asks her why it's been so long since he saw her name in the newspaper; he asks her why she doesn't trade that old, rickety Harley in for something really fast, something Japanese. "Unless that's more kick than you can take," Logan says.

"Mmm-hmm." Nora hunches over the magazine. She doesn't have to wait; she could call someone to pick her up, but the number of trustworthy rides is dwindling fast. She has vowed not to call Daniel, no matter how lonely she feels. She wonders whether they could really just slip out of each other's nights without speaking to each other; she wonders if he will return to his wife.

Dr. Mapp's public statement plays again on the noon news. The TV is bolted to the wall, the volume off, but Nora watches Dr. Mapp gripping the sides of the podium, his face strained. She has seen him on the news several times since he took over the pharmaceutical company, but only once in person when she was driving past Troutdale and he was walking out of the restaurant, his arm around his daughter's shoulders; they'd been alone, her mother still inside, Nora had guessed. The Mapps weren't native to Bristol, having moved from somewhere north—OH she thinks—to the TN side when Madeleine began 7th grade at Vance. They had no other children, and before Madeleine's change this summer, Nora had often wondered if having a brother or sister would have made her less pious, less shy.

The clip of Dr. Mapp leads into a shot of Paul MacKenzie and Anthony Green leaving the courthouse after questioning last night. MacKenzie's family—both parents and all of his siblings—stand outside their dented mini-van. The camera pans toward

Green, his handsome face nearly hidden by a VA High baseball cap, his hands buried in the pockets of his jeans. No one is there to pick him up, and he climbs into the van with the MacKenzies when Paul turns out of his father's hug and waves at him. They drive away into the night, and Nora realizes Purchase had been wrong yesterday afternoon when he said the boys had already been released.

“You know that colored boy isn't innocent in all this.” Logan leans on the counter across the waiting room, waiting for her to agree. She chucks the magazine at the coffee table and stands up to call someone, maybe Keith Housman, maybe Gaven, to pick her up. She frowns at Logan and says, “I know that's what everyone thinks, but they're wrong.”

Rh

Jacob begins to seriously worry about Cecil. Walking as far as he dares toward the shop's display window, he's relieved to see the boy is breathing, his chest keeping a steady rhythm. He's ashamed to admit he wants the boy to get up and leave so he can finish this theft—much more than he wants the boy to get up and leave before the stranger comes back out of the Nickel House to inflict further harm.

Jacob returns to the office and shuts the safe, but he has so damaged its lock that the door to the strong box will not hold in the latch. He straightens his desk, wiping down the ink bottles and hoping Louise hasn't woken and gone looking for him in the

attic. There's so much left for him to accomplish before he can leave the shop, so much of this false night left for him to stage. By day after tomorrow, it will be written in final draft in the *Daily Courier*. He piles the pen nibs on his desk and places them in a drawer. Then he realizes he shouldn't be tidying the place—he should leave the drawers open, the contents scattered. Even this he cannot safely do until Cecil leaves or is carried off, as he'd need everything to appear in its usual place if someone came along and did notice his presence in the store. If worst comes to worst, he'll need to be able to say he'd stayed late to finish his books. After another ¼ of an hour, he returns to the shadows of the showroom to take another peek at the street.

Cecil is gone. Jacob searches the street east and west as far as he can see but the boy is no longer in sight.

Ga

I know that, but that's not why. I knew about the missing girl. Right after it happened. We were waiting on a track switch one morning around 6:00 and my window stopped parallel to the back of the station. Most often, my window is just like a mirror and reflects little more than my face, but the sun was hardly risen and cast no glare, and I saw the flyers—red ones taped to the center of each window. And, later, when they still couldn't find a body or any sort of trace, her face went state-wide I'm guessing on both

the VA and TN news, so they covered it even in Norfolk. Her father made sure of that, I'm guessing.

And, those flyers were still there when we hit the boy yesterday. Or, some of them—some of them appeared to have been ripped down or carried away by the weather. Yes, 2 weeks is a long time when it comes to missing girls.

So, when that officer told the other cops they still had a girl to be looking for, I knew what he was talking about; that wasn't why he was familiar. From the way he talked yesterday, it didn't seem like he had much to do with that.

I knew him from years and years ago. From when I still had a great-aunt living in Bristol. She raised chickens and had a thing for Tennessee Ernie Ford, and I'd visit her every summer.

W

What with the exactitude of his memory, of course Emil recognizes the man standing in front of him in Nora's yard, the same man he saw with the blue-haired girl in the train station tobacco shop a few days ago. He isn't sure Daniel is as benign as he claims to be; Emil can tell the man is upset to find a stranger—or anyone?—at Nora's house, and he wants to keep the man around a little longer to see what information may surface. He points at the barn standing across the ill-kept yard, asks Daniel what is kept there, and begins to walk in its direction.

The man follows him a few steps before halting and saying, “I’m not sure it’s polite to be poking around.”

Emil keeps walking, and the overgrown grass scrapes his jeans past the knee; he will have to remember to check for ticks. “It won’t hurt. Maybe she will come home soon, and we can wait a bit for her until then.” Emil tries to pay little attention to the man now, just wanting him to be swept along until he reveals more about himself.

The gray wood of the barn looks to be the same as the house, given the spots visible where the paint has flaked. Its door leans so that one would have to lift it to get its latch to fit over the hasp on the other door, and Emil has to pull hard to open it against the grass. The floor inside is dirt, and planks from the loft floor have fallen below; even the ladder that must have been propped there is split into pieces and lying on the ground. There’s very little clutter in the barn—a few empty flowerpots and garden tools, a rusted mower that looks like it might not be operational. The only thing of significance taking up space in the barn is an ancient black automobile with thin, flat wheels.

“What do you call that?” Emil says.

“It’s a Ford Model T. She—Nora’s mother—mentioned she owned one.”

Emil glances at Daniel. He’s still standing in the doorway of the barn, as if he’s afraid its roof might cave at any moment.

“Does it drive?”

“I doubt it. I don’t think she’s touched it in years.”

The barn has the sour, glue-like odor of decayed rubber.

Daniel finally follows Emil, as if the sight of the unusual car has overridden any trepidation he felt about trespassing. He walks over to a wall and wiggles one of its beams, testing its sturdiness. “She should really get someone out here to rebuild.”

Emil peers into the window of the car; his hands leave deep prints in the dust of the Model T. “The house probably needs some help before this place. Also this car. Look.” The bench seat has been torn along the passenger’s side, chewed by rats, he guesses, and the yellowed stuffing litters the floorboard. The man named Daniel looks into the backseat and says, “She could live for a year on this if she cleaned it up and sold it.”

“Does she need the money? Is that why the house looks so rotten?”

“No. She has money from her mother. I was just saying—“

“You know Nora well, don’t you?” Emil studies the man and could swear he flinches. “How did you know them? Her and her mother?”

“There’s boxes back here.” Daniel sticks his arm through the window and folds back the cardboard flaps.

“Maybe we shouldn’t—”

The man drags a beach towel back through the window; he shakes it out, then drops it and goes back to the box. “Why did she keep this?” he says. He pulls out more dust-ridden things from the car: a plastic tote bag; a pair of small flip-flops; a set of

deflated water wings. “Wait,” Emil says. He is confused, but the man looks at each object and throws it on the ground, saying all the while, “Why did she keep this?” He must have emptied the box, because he finally steps back and shoves his hands in his hair and stares at the pile in the dirt. After a moment, he looks toward the door of the barn and says, “Why did you keep this?”

U

Nora stands in the doorway, the smell of the earth doubly strong under the late afternoon heat. She watches Daniel throw his son’s towel and flip-flops from her great-grandfather’s Model T. If Nora’s mother’s word can be trusted, the car hasn’t moved from the barn since Jacob Polk died, because her grandmother never learned to drive and refused to sell it when the man named Valentine offered to take it as part of the deal to liquidate the jewelry shop. Nora doesn’t know why she stored Johnny Clifford’s things in the car, exactly; she just knows she didn’t want them in her house.

She watches for a moment before Daniel says, “Why did you keep this?”

The pitch of his voice makes her wish she had nothing—not his son’s belongings; not the many diamonds; not the soil beneath her feet.

Emil is looking at her, too, now. She is strangely glad for his presence; she’s relieved that finally someone is there to fill the space between her and Daniel. Emil—she has stopped thinking of him as *the foreign kid*—knows next to nothing of either of them,

and he might perhaps be the best possible person to tell them how to behave. She feels a knot dissolve in the space between her shoulderblades. “I was too ashamed to return them to your wife.” She looks at Emil. “It wouldn’t have been right, would it, to leave them in the lost-and-found?”

Np

Elements prone to radioactivity undergo what is known as a decay event. Take U, Emil might say, the last and heaviest natural element on the Periodic Table—its nucleus will spontaneously break apart and form a daughter nucleus of another atomic element, and that daughter can form a granddaughter, and so forth. It is unpredictable and random; it happens all by itself without the outside interference that explains most familiar chemical compositions. The isotope U-238 becomes Rn and Po, among others, before it achieves stability at Pb. Of course, U-238 has a $\frac{1}{2}$ -life of 4,600,000,000 years, so it takes a long time to get Pb. The irony in such a decay series is what makes Emil sometimes distrust whatever force is behind the physics of the Table. How cruel is it that U turns into the very thing that protects a body from the radioactive carcinogens produced along the way?

Emil backs up a few feet and sits against the wall of the barn. He finds a cigarette in the pocket of his jacket and begins to smoke, waiting to see what will happen next. U is not as rare as one might think in the crust of the earth; there could be some of it just

centimeters below the dirt floor here, well on its way to becoming Rn gas and poisoning Nora's home. How much more toxic would that be, though, than what's happening between her and the man named Daniel right now? Their ½-lives will be so short compared to even the most worthless of minerals, and from what Emil is piecing together, that of Daniel's son would be measured in mere days.

Pu

Daniel isn't sure what to do with his son's things now that he has found them: should he gather them up; take them home; give them to his now-ex-wife? How would Mairi take it on the heels of what she revealed yesterday? He wants to give Mairi the cruelty of finding them in Nora's barn, and he imagines leaving the box on Mairi's doorstep with a note: *Wouldn't want to waste these hand-me-downs.*

He feels sick; he's acting sick. He just wants to hurt someone, say something so explosive that it would knock loose the hateful pain for good, and he would indeed do this, even turn it on Nora right now if it weren't for the fact that she has long suffered her own injuries without a shred of anger. Instead, he leans against the sun-warmed hood of the Model T and starts speaking to the unfamiliar boy; the fact that he's sat down and begun to smoke makes Daniel feel as though nothing would shock him. One confession falls from another, as if Daniel is speaking from a great distance into empty space, and he traces his pains backward: Mairi's new pregnancy; the signing of the divorce papers; the

night he spent in jail; the long miles he clocked in Carrie Vulpe's Jaguar; the fact that he hates how he leaned on Nora; the way he refused to return to the Colonial on the TN side after his son died, even when Mairi asked him to collect whatever photographs he wanted to keep; the mess he's made of translating the codex; the day he stole the text from the ancient dirt of southern Tikal. When Daniel finally runs out of things to say, Emil has long since stubbed out his cigarette in the dirt floor of the barn. The boy says, "She left some moments ago. After you said you watched her when she slept."

Pd

Nora stands her ground in the doorway of the barn; the more Daniel speaks, the less she wants to cross the distance between them. All this time she's wanted to shelter him, but she feels the vain effort now of all the nights she waited in the dark beneath the busted hall light for him to open his apartment door. The times he'd open the door, she'd sit behind him in bed, her flat belly to his back, always waiting to feel some weight shift there. The fact that Daniel can't even look at her when he speaks these things that are his greatest embarrassments makes everything clear to her now; she has been just another warm thing keeping him apart from everything he needed to confront. He doesn't even realize that most of what he's saying she already knows—Mairi being at his house yesterday; his trouble with the student; the way he never slept. Nora even knows about the artifact he took from Guatemala; she's seen it in his drawer when he's forgotten to

shut it, seen the Post-it notes where he's copied certain glyphs and scratched translations: something to do with the number 0.

Nora does what she has always done to everyone except Daniel: she leaves. Just steps backward through the barn door and leans into the tall grass.

She left the door unlocked again this morning—she is always forgetting—and she wonders briefly if Emil and Daniel had come into the house. For a moment in the living room, she misses her mother, who might be sifting through old pastry recipes on the sofa right now if she were still alive, trying to find something new to showcase at the bakery. Her mother never tread very far into Nora's affairs, but what might she say if Nora asked her what to do about Daniel? *Bake him a pie? Sleep with men your own age?*

The pouch of thieved diamonds is still where she dropped it last on the end table beside the door. She still can't get accustomed to the weight of it; the sack's heavy as a change purse. She carries it upstairs and goes in search of her mother's engagement ring, the one Gaven said she'd regret if she didn't keep. It was Nora's fault her mother had stopped wearing her rings. Once, she'd been in a horrible mood after another girl at school had called her a slut for French-kissing a boy from the VA side, and instead of finding her mother at the bakery counter ready to pay attention to her, Nora found her crying in the back because she'd left her rings too close to the ovens and melted one side of the wedding band out of shape. And, Nora had yelled at her, as she was bound to do at some point, being in the throes of any number of teenage melodramas, about *When are you going to get your head out of that lake?* The next day, her mother didn't put them

back on after closing the bakery. But, when she died, Officer Purchase returned the rings they'd found on her body, the wedding band repaired.

Her mother's things are still piled in the 2nd floor hallway, where Nora left them after she found the diamonds. It takes Nora a minute to remember where she'd put the rings, but she finds them in a Ziploc bag in one of the dresser drawers. She compares the stone in the engagement ring to the ones in the velvet pouch. *Which explains why there's only 29* she is thinking when Emil says, "Are you very upset?" He has indeed caught her off-guard, and she slips the ring onto her center finger and turns the stone toward her palm.

Cs

The silver-tinged blue of the sky hurts Daniel's eyes when he crosses the yard, and he leaves the Polish boy on the front porch. The Subaru's engine knocks in reaction to the faulty spark plugs, and the brakes screech like trees against a windowpane. Repairing the car will eat up the rest of his summer teaching pay, and he's due to sign the teaching contract at V.I. for fall. He'll have to take it, just to be able to afford to live in the apartment on Moore St.

How did a man who used to set his watch according to the atomic clock wind up so unbalanced?

Daniel turns right onto State St. and passes the furniture store Mairi's father had owned until he retired, selling it after Johnny died. The man who'd bought it hadn't done well; he moved north and closed the shop after 6 months. Cardboard boxes and wooden pallets sit in the empty window. Should Daniel have let Mairi take everything in the divorce? She hadn't asked for anything, and he'd told her, spitefully, that he didn't want to hear anything out of her parents about how he'd cheated her in the division of property. It wasn't true—he never had gotten along with Mairi's parents, especially her mother, a first-generation Norwegian who hid the fact that she still spoke the language and had always expected more grandchildren after Johnny, but they generally kept their silence around Daniel.

The Subaru begins to lag in front of KSS office supply, a couple of blocks from the turn he needs to make onto Moore St. The gas gauge claims the tank is ½-full, but Daniel realizes the needle hasn't moved much since the last time he drove. And, when did he last fill the tank? Almost a month ago, now? He just makes it out of the street and to the curb in front of *Good Place Thrift* before the engine dies. The nearest gas station is 8 blocks west on State, but instead of heading in that direction, Daniel walks into the 2nd-hand store and comes out 10 minutes later with the best suitcase he could find, a turquoise, hard-sided Samsonite. He carries it under his arm, veers onto Moore St., and marches past Tate's Newstand. He only gets a few steps farther when he backtracks to take another look at what's caught his eye in the newstand's window, a flyer with the same picture the arresting officer showed him a few nights ago, the text at the bottom reading ...*disappeared from Bristol Country Club*...

Tc

“I need to pick up my bike,” Nora says. “If you take me, I’ll show you how to ride it.”

Pm

Jacob fills his coat pockets with the safe’s contents, taking things he doesn’t even want, like his father’s prized fire opals and the near-empty cashbox, saving the brilliants for last. He knows everyone will wonder why the thief took nothing from the showcases, but he made sure each was locked when he closed the shop at 4:00. He’ll lead Constable Grinkin to believe the thief wouldn’t risk being sounded out by breaking the glass. Jacob leaves the paperwork and cheaper items in the safe—pewter thimbles and hatpins—all those knickknacks his customers required but which he never displayed because of their plainness. He scatters the contents of the desk so it too looks searched, and then he locks the door behind him.

Always fearful of heights, he shakes as he climbs the fire escape to the roof.

Te

Emil follows Nora from the motorcycle repair shop to the abandoned parking lot of Belmont Lanes off Weaver Pk. It's still only 5:30, and the bowling alley won't open for another couple of hours. He parks his host-parents' car in the back of the lot. The place is well-worn, the asphalt lined with a mess of cigarette butts, broken beer bottles, and abandoned socks.

Emil is uncomfortable on the motorcycle. The steel feels insubstantial to him, an alloy too weak to hold him safely above the earth, but he doesn't want to give up the chance to be near Nora. And, in Gdansk, he will have this recklessness to remember. Nora sits behind him and explains each of the starting steps; her hands brush his as she sets the kill switch to run. The throttle warms like gold in his hand. At first, he is unsteady and drops his foot to the pavement at the slightest wobble. After a ¼-hour of circling the lot, he grows accustomed to the throb of the engine and begins to twist the handlebar more confidently. He passes the doors of the bowling alley again, and Nora leans into his back and points toward the lot's exit.

Ir

It's a small town where everybody knows everybody's business, but that goes

double if you're black and you live black, crowded into an all-black block on the VA side.

The officer had a son. Out of wedlock, and the mother was black. The daughter of the old woman who lived beside my great-aunt.

A long time ago. I was a kid. I saw them arguing in her driveway. He might've been in his late 20s; I might've been 7 or 8. My great-aunt had given me a compass to play with, and I was walking around in circles in the front yard, trying to get the needle to point north. Damn thing was busted. Couldn't find your way to the front door with it.

He had a ponytail then, too. He kept saying *I've got that whole house, that whole house*. Like he was promising her the pot at the end of the rainbow. I'd not yet seen a white man make such a fuss over a black woman—voice pitched high and kissing her hands. I've seen it plenty since then, believe you me.

I know he never married; that's what I'm getting at. Either she refused him, or he was just asking her to shack up.

I don't think the son knew him, at least not as his father.

Br

The phone rings, waking Nora on Thursday. She's overslept, which rarely happens, and her throat's sore from shouting directions to Emil over the motorcycle's

roar.

“Miss Polk?”

She slumps back against the pillows, still tired. “I am.”

The person on the phone identifies himself as Detective Anderson, a man with a face Nora knows from almost every murder case televised on the TN side. Anderson is young for a detective, only in his 30s; he uses too much gel in his hair and has a nose that curls like a shrimp. He says she’s on his list of Club employees working Monday afternoon when Miss Mapp disappeared; he says he’s the homicide detective in charge of the case.

“Does that mean you have a body?”

“No. It means I think there’s a body somewhere out there.”

“Maybe she might—” Nora says, and she’s about to repeat Gaven’s conviction that Madeleine may indeed return, but the detective cuts her off and says he wants her to come to the station so he can interview her personally now that he’s in charge; he says he wants to speak to everyone involved as soon as possible in the hopes that more violence may be avoided.

“What do you mean?”

“A group of men attacked Mr. Green early this morning. He’s in the hospital.”

Nora tells him she’ll be there within the hour. She grabs her clothes, runs downstairs, and dresses in front of the TV. She has to wait for the end of a game show to

get the Channel 5 news update at 10:00, but they waste no time describing the attack on Anthony Green. He'd been found in the senior parking lot of TN High at 5:00 a.m., bleeding badly from a broken leg and beaten unconscious, but with what or by whom *authorities do not yet know, as Green hasn't regained consciousness at Bristol Regional Medical Center.* The update ends with side-by-side school photos of Anthony and Madeleine, both smiling as if they find it funny.

Os

Detective Anderson's office is spare with a stack of folders piled meticulously on each end of his desk. Venetian blinds cover the window, and the only wall decorations are framed certificates: a Police Academy diploma; a thank-you letter from Governor McWherter. Anderson wears a white button-down and khakis, his tie loosened so the knot lies against his sternum. Nora tells him everything she told the responding officer Monday afternoon: how she was cleaning the dressing room when the babysitter disappeared; how Brian was gone when she and Wakefield went looking for Madeleine. He takes notes and has an annoying habit of clicking his pen repeatedly between her answers. Nora asks whether he got the bathing suit she left with Purchase.

Anderson says, "Dr. Mapp says it's not hers."

"Did you bother to check the Blantons' lake house?"

Anderson ignores the question and clicks his pen again. “Let me go back a minute. Were MacKenzie and Green still there when you left the dressing room?”

Nora wishes she could say yes. “Don’t you already know that?”

Anderson’s eyes flick back and forth when he looks her in the eye, and she wonders why he isn’t more subtle about reading his interviewees.

“I know what they told me. I’m asking you.”

Nora sighs. “They weren’t sitting where they’d been, but they could have been in the snack bar or the 19th Hole. I left the pool to look for her, so whoever came or left in the next 30 minutes, I don’t know. Wakefield would be the one to ask.”

“I have,” Anderson says. “Now, do you know MacKenzie and Green?”

“Only from the pool.” Nora knows what Anderson wants to hear, but she isn’t going to repeat the rumors about MacKenzie and Madeleine.

Not that he hasn’t heard them from everyone else, she suspects.

Nora wonders, briefly, if Dr. Mapp knew anything about the boy prior to Monday.

“I thought you were friends with one of them. Which would mean both of them. I hear they come as a package, so to speak.”

“I didn’t know them, and I hardly knew Madeleine. All I know is that they were occasional guests who came with her.”

Anderson’s phone rings, but he doesn’t answer, doesn’t even glance at the phone. “Do you think Madeleine and Green were close?”

“No, I think they beat the shit out of him because he was black.”

“Part-black. I think there’s a white grandparent—”

“Black enough. Do you know who did it?”

“No, he hasn’t been able to speak yet, Miss Polk. Please let me finish my questions.”

“Fine.” Nora picks her keys up, hoping the gesture will speed the detective along. Before he can ask anything else, though, the intercom bursts with a note of static, and a voice says, “TBI, line 2. They’ve got a fingerprint from Green in the backseat—” Anderson hits the silence button on the intercom and frowns at Nora.

“Like that’s some revelation. She drove him to the pool.”

“Not so trivial,” Anderson says. “Not if the rest of the car’s been wiped down.” He looks at the blinking light on his phone and tells her he’ll let her know if he needs anything else. Nora picks up her helmet and is ½ -way through the door when he calls after her, “And, good luck on Saturday!”

Si

The roof of Polk & Sons lays wedged between the walls of the adjoining buildings, which provides Jacob extra coverage from passersby. Still, he crawls on his

knees to the single windowpane above the office; once there, he lies on his belly and empties the pockets of his jacket again.

The night carries no haze, and the stars tinge the shell of the sky a luminous blue, despite the lack of moon.

Jacob lays his jacket over the glass and strikes it, handle-end, with his riding crop. The first time, he doesn't hit hard enough, but with the second stroke, the window fractures against the iron bars beneath it. He drags his jacket back through the opening, the glass landing with the sound of struck flint. Once his breath eases, he feels the warmth in his hand and realizes he's cut his thumb on the edge of the glass; by the time he examines the wound, he has already managed to smear blood on his jacket. He spits and tries to collect the drops with his handkerchief, but this only enlargens the stains. He wraps his thumb, rolls on his back, and listens for sounds from the street.

No one comes.

Jacob peers into the opening. The glass has broken against the surface of his desk and the floor. He re-pockets the objects from the lockbox and pins the white velvet purse of diamonds to the lining to ensure it doesn't jounce to the ground during his ride home.

The cut on the back of his thumb begins to sting, and he is careful not to transfer blood to rungs of the fire escape or the doorknob as he re-opens the office. He leaves the door ajar, staging the thief's exit.

Only now does he check his pocketwatch. It's $\frac{1}{4}$ -past midnight, and he is anxious to get home. What will he say to Louise if she is awake? He keeps to the wall,

but at the mouth of the alley beyond Abel's Grocery, he flinches when he discerns a dark figure sitting against the wall. The boy stands up, breathing heavy, his fingers leaving smudges on the brick. Sweat? Ale? Blood? The boy stands still but appears ready to run if necessary.

Jacob adjusts his jacket, feigning preoccupation. "You best hurry home to your mother, Cecil."

The boy shifts his gaze to the ground and says, "Headed that direction just now, Mr. Polk."

Nd

Daniel actually slept last night—6 full hours. He slept so soundly, he is momentarily confused by the rustle of paper when he wakes. A few Post-its fall to the floor, and he remembers copying glyphs from the codex last night; he recalls last checking the clock some moments past 2:00. He thought he'd distinguished the morphemes from the syllabic signs and felt so close to making some sense of the entire text—something about the astronomical justification for the Maya's inclusion of 0 in their numerological system—but he couldn't find several of the glyphs in the new handbooks he'd ordered. Would even an epigraphist be able to translate the text alone? He'd begun to suspect the writing wasn't even indigenous to Tikal—it could be that the

symbols were those of a ruler in another city, perhaps Copán or even Chichén Itzá. What sort of revolution would that mean for his field, if the text had traveled so far?

He grows angry with himself for leaving the codex folded open on the other pillow. Every time he opens and shuts it, he risks splitting the fig bark. He feels worse when he remembers what a fool he made of himself in front of Nora and her strange friend yesterday afternoon, telling them about the ancient text. Is he trying to force someone's hand? Does he want to get caught?

On the floor, the turquoise suitcase lays open, still empty.

Daniel puts his sketches away, changes into his last clean shirt, and bundles his dirty clothes. Outside V.I.'s Laundromat, he buys *The Herald Courier*. The Mapp girl's disappearance is still front-page news. He drops his quarters into a washer, settles down on a bench along the wall, and tries to piece together the chronology behind the investigation. Even the kids in the dormitory laundry room are talking about the girl—words like *naked* and *ditch* punctuating the chug of the machines. It's the twinning of the incidents that most disturbs him, the coincidence of the girl disappearing on the anniversary of his son's accident. All the reading of Maya texts is getting to him; their authors followed the rotations of not one but three interlocked calendars and believed bad dates would always repeat badly.

The smell of wet socks and powdered detergent also does nothing to ease the queasy stomach Daniel's had since Monday when Carrie Vulpe knocked on his door. He wishes she would come strolling into the laundry room right now with a basket full of

ripped jeans and fishnet tights, shooting off at the mouth about pathetic ex-boyfriends. Anything to restore the order he'd managed to bear for the last year—he'd become familiar to the wince in his bones when he thought of Johnny after a few hours of distraction, grew almost to need it, as if it were the weight that ensured his footing.

Mo

Nora leaves her bike behind a tree some ways distant from the Blanton lakehouse. Brian's van isn't parked at the foot of the driveway, but she knows any number of his friends might be left inside. She waits beneath the staircase landing of the staircase and listens, hearing nothing. She climbs down the winding steps to the pier.

The Blanton yacht, a 1982, 44' Viking Motor Craft that Blanton, Esq. must surely now rue christening *The Alimony*, appears not to have been properly winterized last season. An algae-colored ring surrounds the hull above the water line, and the deck carries the corresponding smell of vegetation. Still, Nora knows the vessel would go for nearly a \$¼-million if Brian's mother ever took the notion sell—not that she'd ever do it; she'd sink the boat before she'd risk it getting back into her ex-husband's hands.

And, Nora knows she's similarly stubborn. She knows she's here only because of what happened to Daniel's son—because she doesn't want to feel responsible for another mishap. But, if Nora stopped and thought harder about what's pushing her to suspect Brian and steal onto his boat this afternoon, she'd realize that she's really been dying to

salvage a body for much, much longer, ever since her father went down in the lake more than a decade ago, as if putting anyone in the ground now will somehow balance the kilter she feels on every floor of her home. Her father's body was never recovered, of course, and she didn't set eyes on her mother's either, having agreed when Gaven Matchman offered to identify her mother and arrange a closed casket. In fact, Johnny Clifford's funeral was the first time Nora had ever seen a dead body. It was difficult, though, for his still frame to make an impression on her; what with his tiny size and pink lips, his navy suit and formal tie, she couldn't *feel* the death filling his casket. He cut too absurd a figure, and she felt next to nothing until she followed the hearse to East Hill Cemetery and saw Daniel. Nora and he had been the only ones to keep a distance, standing at the back of the folding chairs, behind Mairi Clifford, her family, and the other Club employees. At first, Nora thought Daniel was a distant relative; she'd never seen him with Mairi at the pool. She only later recognized him as Johnny's father by the way he suffered; she'd been the only one to see him take off his eyeglasses and crush them when the minister said that *God's plan is beyond our understanding*. Afterward, she waited in the car she'd borrowed from Gaven. She waited for the mourners to disperse; she waited for Daniel to return to his car. When she realized he wasn't headed in the direction of Mairi Clifford's home, she followed him out Volunteer Parkway to the Day's Inn and waited even longer, for the better part of an hour, before knocking on the door she'd seen him enter.

When Daniel opened it, she already had her high heels in her hand, meant to show she would be staying for a while.

Nora finds the bedrooms below deck empty, with only a few stray life jackets and spare buoys out of place. She only intends to check the storage locker where the Blantons have always kept the water skis—the ones she saw inside the house—but she hesitates and checks all the closets and crannies. With nowhere else to look, she kneels beside its place below the stairs, testing the luggage lock in its hasp. If the skis are in the house, why would it be bolted? The smell of the cabin is even more musty than the deck, the air thick with the powdery tang of mold and decay. She sniffs the box, but she can't discern an odor more suspicious than the one present throughout the boat.

It takes her some moments more to find a dirty knife in the sink strong enough to break the lock.

Nora isn't sure whether it's relief or disappointment she finds in the storage box once she sees there's nothing inside: not a body; not a smear of blood; not even the smell of some cleanser. Instead, it's just panic she feels when she hears footsteps above her on the deck; she considers getting inside the locker herself until Keith Housman leans over the stairwell and says, "Got to hide that Harley better, Nora."

On the deck, she only now notices how dingy the lake appears today—its surface the mottled gray-brown of vermin. Only a few ½ -rotten leaves show that the water's moving at all.

Emil sits in the captain's chair, his arm resting on the steering wheel, and she thinks he looks, strangely, as if he belongs there, as if he could surely drop the bow line,

gun the engine, and back away from the dock if he felt inclined. Keith points at him and says, “This one told me I had to come here and find you.”

Nora frowns. “Why you?”

Na

The heat is giving Emil a headache. He swelters even though he’s removed his jacket, draping it on the back of the captain’s chair. The air is already thick and humid again after the rain that fell on Tuesday, and he’s embarrassed for Nora to see the sweat stains under his arms. He wipes his forehead and clears his throat when she emerges from the cabin. She’s wearing a sleeveless sundress, and the straps hang off the shoulders so he can see the bathing suit, as usual, underneath. Her sneakers and ankles are muddy, and he can’t help thinking of what it would be like to shower with her, to watch the soap slide down her legs.

“I just found this out today,” Emil says. “Keith?”

“I picked up Brian from the Club on Monday.” Keith adjusts his baseball cap as if to see Nora more clearly. “He was getting the van cleaned, and I drove him to pick it up.”

“Did you see Madeleine?”

Keith nods. “In the water when we left.”

Nora asks Emil, “Why didn’t you say so before? Why didn’t you say so when we were here?”

“I didn’t know about this. Not then. He just told me.”

Keith moves awkwardly on the boat deck, sidestepping the opening to the cabin and finding a seat at starboard, his bulk taking up ½ the bench. “The detective called me in yesterday,” he says. “I had to sign a statement.”

The look on Nora’s face doesn’t convince Emil she’s relieved—he can tell she suspects Keith would lie for his friend. But, Emil knows his host brother is telling the truth; he knows Keith is truly worried about the girl, too, because his mother makes him attend youth group every Sunday night, so he’s known Madeleine since her family joined First Presbyterian. *And, she isn’t as holy as everyone says*, he had told Emil this morning. *Not after she got out of her father’s earshot.*

“You know I’d sell Brian down the river if I thought he’d touched that girl, Nora.”

“Tell her the rest of the thing now,” Emil says.

Keith sits forward. “I’m not saying this means anything,” he says, “but I saw your long-haired friend with Maddy.”

“Gaven? Gaven Matchman?”

“The guy who comes to your meets? Yeah. Last week.” Emil has learned that for all his girth and loudness, Keith hates for anyone to be unhappy. On the drive to the lake house, he’d asked *How am I going to tell her this? That guy is her only family now.* “She was in his car. On the VA side at Clear Creek. They were just in the parking lot,

talking in his station wagon. I wouldn't even have noticed except I recognized her convertible parked next to him, and there she was in his car, and I was about to knock on the window and say hey, but they looked like they were arguing."

The sun has moved, another ¼-hour gone. Sweat runs down Emil's cheek, and he tastes the salt. He thinks of Na—in its pure, metallic form, it ignites when cast on water. Still, it has none of the white-hot reactivity Nora's face is collecting; she keeps her gaze focused on Keith, as if there might be some telling sign in his face to miss.

Again, Emil says, "There's more."

"She gave him money."

Emil waits for it, and her composure finally falters. Just for a second, she goes up on her toes, and he spies the distress knotted in her calves.

Ru

Nora feels the heat most fiercely inside her shoes where an oily sweat has gathered beneath her toughened heels. She knows now Keith is telling the truth, but she also knows if Gaven was keeping company with Madeleine, he had a reason—a reason most likely of Madeleine's making. It is as if a blind spot has been removed from her eye, and now she can see Gaven cavorting with so many others in her peripheral vision. She isn't ready to talk about it. She asks, "Why was Blanton cleaning the van?"

Keith sits back on the bench, as if he's said everything he's expected to share. Instead, it is Emil who tells her about the venison Blanton, Esq. had left in the van and

how even a detailing didn't remove the odor. He keeps talking, and his voice has a rhythm that for all its sharp edges soothes her. He tells her he will help her find what she is looking for; he tells her he will drive her to Gaven's trailer.

"Whatever you want," he says.

She envies Emil's ease, how he sits so casually in the captain's chair. She wishes she too were from far away and not so enmeshed in this net: the farther it's cast, the less it catches, and it neither wears nor tears. The thought of Thatcher Matchman comes upon her suddenly, and she is struck by how much she misses him still, despite all the entanglements and distractions she's sought, yes, sought, she realizes now, since his leaving near to 3 years ago now, the time doing nothing to tarnish the image of his face bent over her own. What does she miss more—him? Or, the time she knew him? All those long, lovely months when, yes, the death of her father still shone as if new in her mother's eyes, but when she, too, were still there when she woke up in the morning?

Nora nods and then says, "I'd like your help. As long as you realize I'm not going to bed with you."

Ce

None of the 3 of us. I quit when Annie got cancer; she made me promise.

No, I didn't see a cigarette lighter. It was hard to see anything except what it was—a lot of crushed metal and a spray of blood on the front of—

Sorry.

I'm not saying this doesn't bother me, because it does. You'll never be responsible for something like this, whatever you do. I don't even want to get back on to go home, but I'm not going to sit here and drink another cup of coffee, and I wouldn't even be talking to you at all if you weren't just a kid. If you hadn't showed up at the yard looking as lost as you did, like a cat who'd lost her tail.

You realize you don't even know me, and you're not going to no matter how long you sit there pumping me with question-this and question-that? Cigarette lighters? Let's get this over with; what else do you want to know?

At

"We better get off before Brian gets home." Keith shakes his head. "Look what a shithole he keeps it."

Emil stands up, and, for Nora, he's lost whatever intellectual and emotional superiority he held over her a moment ago—he's just an olive-skinned boy again, smart and quick, certainly, but not so stable as she'd thought. He will make nothing more than a capable, albeit frustrated, scientist, she thinks; he has the jittery edginess of someone who works for years on a problem without a solution.

Nora looks over her shoulder at the lake before she follows the boys up the stairs. The surface is still with the gravity it bears after a heavy rain. She can see Badaman's Rock from here, the water so high around it now that she'd hardly be able to pin a single

somersault before she'd hit the water. For once, a chill collects in her throat at the sight of it, and she understands why she never told her mother she dived from its brim.

Nora still wants to know, "Why aren't the skis in the boat?"

"He's fixing the bindings." Keith struggles to catch his breath in the driveway.

"And, oiling the shoes. You guys have to drop me home."

"I don't want to go to Gaven's yet," Nora says. "I need to find some things out first. I don't want to talk to him until he drives me to Nashville Saturday."

I

Jacob unsaddles Penny in her stall, wishing again he'd contracted another to be built in the barn so he could buy his son a horse of his own now before it's too late. But, Louise was scared of horses, and he hadn't thought they'd ever have call for another.

The Model T had been his last splurge prior to losing his footing in the stock market. It's years old now, and though he always preferred the carriage's lilt to the T's dissonant cough, he keeps it pristine out of respect for what it cost him. In the moonlight, the hood shines a deep violet-blue. Jackson Sr. would have thought it grotesque and refused to ride in it, and there is some joy in Jacob when he slits the seat ever so slightly along the passenger's door and squeezes the velvet purse into the stuffing. The T is completely his own, his wife as frightened to drive it as she is of Penny, and he knows the brilliants will be safe here. He still hasn't figured out how he will leave her word of their location, but he is too tired to think of that now. He mends the seam with a black thread

and considers his pocketwatch at the stable door, making out a time he hasn't seen in years: 2:18.

His hand has stopped bleeding. He rues the creaking of the stairs in the house and has a time finding the sterile solution in the washroom cupboards, as Louise has always kept track of the medicines. He remembers her tending a scrape on Jackson Jr.'s knee last week; he'd watched her do it, something akin to fear settling in his ribcage as he watched his tough, blonde-headed boy eating a ginger snap, impervious to the antiseptic's sting.

Louise doesn't stir when he finally joins her in bed, and it isn't until breakfast that she notices his bandaged thumb.

"I am a fool," he tells her. "I tried to mend the desk hinge with my knife. I'd only sharpened the blade last Thursday." He keeps spooning oatmeal into his mouth.

"It's an odd angle for a gash. Are you sure Doc Blanton shouldn't give it a stitch?"

Jacob shakes his head. What will she think when she realizes how much smaller her stone is than the ones he leaves behind?

He arrives earlier than usual, as planned, at Polk & Sons. There is almost no foot traffic on the street; even Abel's Grocery won't open for another 20 minutes. He makes certain to enter through the front door and walk the full distance to the office before he turns around, retraces his steps, and trots down the street to the constable's office. He passes Eli Everhart and tells him, breathlessly, to guard his shop. He finds Constable Grinkin shaving in his apartment behind the holding cell. By the time they return, a few

businessmen have gathered in the front of his showroom and are examining the locked panels of the counters.

Jacob keeps his bandaged thumb as close to his side as possible when it isn't in his trouser pocket.

Grinkin stares at the broken skylight. Traces of soap still spot his healthy, stretched neck. "Must have had some fall. Though I don't see any blood."

Eli Everhart is almost cheerful, and Jacob knows the young bachelor is happy for the excuse to delay the start of his work day at the train station. He mimics Grinkin's stance and balls his fists on his hips. "Could've had himself a rope to shimmy down," he says.

"Let's just think about this thing," Grinkin says.

Jacob lets himself be shuffled to the back of the growing crowd in his office, feigning speechlessness. The men are just about to send someone to the roof when a voice clears its throat in the office doorway. It's the stranger Jacob watched some hours ago, still in the same suit and polished boots. In a distinctly French accent, he makes it known, "I am fully knowledgeable of who has robbed this place, gentlemen."

Gd

Daniel takes so much time folding his laundry and removing the static cling that he almost forgets his class. At 3 minutes to 2:00, he grabs the textbook and trots across the street to the social sciences building. He hasn't prepared a substantial lesson plan, but

tomorrow is the last day. He will let their nervousness about the final exam and their questions guide the discussion.

When he enters, his students are talking about the boy who had been beaten, and they are arguing about whether he is really involved in the Mapp girl's disappearance. Daniel lets them talk into class time as he lists exam topics on the blackboard, curious as to what they may know. When Jenn says Green may have deserved it, Gabe Short snickers. "You didn't even go to school with him. He's on the honor roll, and he belongs to the chess club. He *started* the fucking chess club—"

Jenn says, "What, rapists can't play chess now?"

"Who said she was raped?"

"Why else would they have wanted her?"

Daniel cuts them off and says, "I'd worry about the exam if I were you." Jenn asks him to review the primary ethical obligations of artifact recover when Carrie Vulpe opens the door, and removes the headphones from her portable CD player. The music is audible, and Daniel recognizes verses from *The Cure*. Her T-shirt doesn't quite cover the handprint bruise on her arm; the fingermarks are the red-black color of garnets. She takes her desk and says, "I can still take the exam, right? I have a good excuse for my absences."

Instead of saying *yes* or *no* or anything that would settle the question definitively, Daniel is surprised to find himself answering, "We will discuss it after class." It takes him some seconds to recover from the shock of her appearance and recall the topic of his lecture, but he considers the page of his open text and drones on about the archeological

site as nonrenewable resource as he flips through the chapter. After a while, he picks up on a subtle clicking. Carrie isn't paying attention. Fingers pinched, she's trying to push a pair of magnets together with identical poles facing, but they keep flipping over so north meets south.

Ho

Carrie keeps her seat as the others pack up, and Daniel asks, "What are you doing with those?"

She shrugs and clips the magnets together. "We're studying them in physics. I like to feel the pull between them." He hadn't noticed until now that the blue streaks are gone from her hair—it's all dyed black now and pulled in a ponytail.

"Rumor has it the Jaguar owner showed up."

Carrie smiles. "He *did* want his car back. Fair enough. I gave it to him, and he left."

"But, he left his fingerprints behind?"

"He was just excited to see me." Carrie tugs on her sleeve, but it still doesn't cover the bruise. The gesture takes away her hard edges, though, and she speaks to him for once without smiling. She says she's sorry she got him involved in her problems; she says she just wanted to get his mind off his son. She says she knows she is a meddler; she says she's toxic and she knows that, too, and she can't help leaving a trail of good intentions gone bad.

“I doubt you’re toxic,” Daniel says. He still sits on the edge of his desk, and he realizes it’s been a while since he’s talked to anyone like this—in a brightly-lit room, with the intention of making someone else feel better and without questioning everything that comes out of his mouth.

Carrie slumps in her desk and shakes her head. “No, it’s a wonder I’m not the one who disappeared.”

Pa

First, you have to understand that the woman wasn’t from Bristol. This is all according to my great-aunt’s recollection, and I wouldn’t pledge everything is 100% purely accurate, but I do know this to be true: the mother was born in South Africa, and her people worked in mining—

I don’t know. It could’ve been. You keep asking more questions, and I’m never going to finish answering the ones you’ve already asked.

Somehow, her parents got out of Africa right before ’48, and they took up mining in Grundy, and then her father got cancer or something, of course, and I’m not certain of the entire chain of events, her mother wound up in Bristol after he died. To live with a friend whose husband had gotten a job there until she found work.

It was just her and the daughter after the father died; no other relatives left Africa.

You know that mansion out at Goosepimple Junction? Out in the middle of nowhere with the ½-mile driveway and the gate, though the nearest other building’s a barn that hasn’t been home to neither horse nor cow for 30-some years? Right, the guy

that owns the coal mines. Well, here's the bitch of it all—she goes to work scrubbing floors and making beds for the guy, and it's not until she's been there some time until she realizes why the guy's so rich. And, she's stuck. She's a legal citizen, but it's not like she even has an American high school diploma, so what else is she going to do?

So, the daughter finishes growing up, and she goes to work so she and her mother can afford to buy the house next to my Aunt Marie. That's how they end up there.

Maybe she was a school teacher or a library clerk. This was 30 years ago, and all I remember is she didn't go to work in a uniform and she dressed nice. In wool skirts and high heels. Even my Aunt Marie chided her for wanting to be white, which isn't something to be ignored since she'd heard the same thing her whole life with a name like Marie.

The woman's name was Lerato. The one time I spoke to her, a few summers before I saw her with the man, she told me it meant "love." Might as well have meant "poison" as far as she was concerned.

How would I know where the cop met her?

Now, nobody in that neighborhood and certainly none of the whites are going to do a double-take at a black woman getting pregnant without a husband, but when that baby came out looking faded, it was almost like every front door on all 4 sides of the block went shut at the same moment. And, Aunt Marie even broke down and said it was shameful to act like they were too good for her when anybody with a decent set of eyes would've known, like she did, that Lerato was messing around with the white officer all along.

The last Aunt Marie said about it, I don't think he ever did get to see the baby boy. Or, at least, not up close.

Fr

The stranger introduces himself as Jules Chevalier, a professor of history from *La Sorbonne*, but Jacob hardly trusts this after what he saw last night. Constable Grinkin also seems suspicious and questions the man about his arrival in Bristol. Chevalier admits he arrived only the day before yesterday, on his way as far south as Chalmette, LA. "I am writing a book on the effects of the war on the good people of the southern states."

"You're a little late for that," someone says.

Chevalier carries the glint of a smile in his eyes. "No, my friend. The Great War."

"Your English is awfully practiced for a foreigner," Grinkin says. "Why shouldn't we think you are responsible for this theft?"

Jacob respects Grinkin very much—the man had been a decade younger than Jackson Sr., but the men kept a friendship for as long as Jacob can recall, a bond cemented by a shared affection for the novels of Balzac and duck hunting. Grinkin's as honest and intelligent an officer as a twin town could hope for; it is rumored he only had occasion to punch a man once in his 40-odd years as constable. A traveling salesman had pulled down his swimming suit in front of Abel's eldest daughter while bathing at the

lake, and when the man was arrested, he offered a bribe to Grinkin, who decked him and escorted him onboard the next morning's train. Now, he is getting a little too elderly to be as imposing as he once was, and Jacob wants to tell him about the soap still visible on his neck so as to avoid appearing foolish in front of the European.

"I think Mr. Everhart can vouch for my whereabouts last evening. We found a very intoxicated Negro in the saloon's stock room and deposited him on the street. I think you will find him your culprit." Chevalier rests his hand on Eli's shoulder and says, "Isn't that so?"

"Absolutely."

Jacob is still clinging to the office wall to steady his nerves, but he finally breaks into the conversation. "Now, just wait a moment or two, this is my shop, and I think we need to let Constable Grinkin investigate before we begin accusing every Negro who had the occasion to walk down State St. this week—"

"Don't you worry, Jacob. I'm going to sort through this," Grinkin says.

Chevalier says, "Come out here, *Monsieur*, let me make your acquaintance."

Abel and Eli step aside so the stranger can make eye contact with Jacob, whose bandaged thumb is hidden in his pocket. The man stares, unmoving but for the white whiskers of his mustache vibrating every so slightly under his breath. Jacob could swear Chevalier winks just before he opens his mouth to say, "We are here as witnesses."

"You stay right where you are," Grinkin says, "but I want any of you men who weren't at the Nickel House last night or who have no pertinent information to get on your way." Abel and Doc Blanton's son and the tailor from across the street shuffle

slowly through the showroom, speculating about who the drunken Negro might be and how many there might have been at the hotel's saloon last night. Grinkin's voice drops into the twang he was born with, the voice he uses only with native friends. "Too many cooks in your kitchen, son."

"Yes, sir," Jacob says.

Grinkin squats in front of the still-ajar safe. "You even looked yet to see what-all's missing?"

Eli Everhart and Chevalier are standing in the doorway of the office, and they are talking about something else now and laughing.

"Eli, run down to the office and get my jar and brush." Grinkin looks up at Jacob and says, "I can tell you if there's any prints on here, but I'll have to get the dactyloscopist down here to see if there's any but your own. I wouldn't expect too much, mind you." He questions Jacob about when he closed yesterday and who else might have access to the shop, and Jacob responds with well-rehearsed answers. He tells Grinkin about the new order of diamonds; he tells how he sold the first one just days ago to the mayor of Abingdon.

"That's how the Negro must have the knowledge about them," Chevalier says.

Eli says, "Cecil. He means Cecil."

Grinkin looks over his shoulder. "What sort of truck do you think Cecil Murry has with Mayor Plumb? That boy's hardly 16 years old, and he runs himself ragged for that mother of his. I hardly think he'd risk something so close to home."

Jacob feels nothing for the insurance company that will actually have to reimburse him the cost of the brilliants, but the sour taste of guilt rises in his mouth when he thinks of Cecil working every day but Christmas at the Olympic Theatre to feed his mother, a woman who'd lost a foot when the colored doctor set the break incorrectly. Jacob hadn't even considered someone real might be blamed for the theft.

"Word gets around," Eli says, "and we did see the boy stumble in this direction." Everhart fingers his tie-pin, a too-bright gold clip with a blue star at one end, and Jacob wonders why the stationmaster is going along with Chevalier's story. Eli has always been slimy, but perhaps he really believes the boy burgled the store? What motive would they otherwise have for casting suspicion in his direction?

"How old is this strongbox, anyhow?"

"It was Dad's," Jacob says. "I couldn't stand to get rid of it."

"You'll have to now." Grinkin shakes the stiffness out of his knees. "Shame. Jackson had all those years without a theft. I guess you were due. I'm glad he isn't here to see it. A broken trust would've killed him on the spot."

Jacob nods.

Grinkin faces Chevalier and asks Jacob, "What do you think of this one?"

"I can assure you I am a legitimate scholar. I have letters of—," Chevalier says.

"I don't much care what his line is. I think your office can investigate this burglary without his help." The stranger's patent-leather boots are heeled; they aren't the flat brogues in fashion now, and Jacob wonders if that's what everyone in Paris wears and how he keeps them so polished when State St. isn't cobbled.

“I think he ought to come up to the roof with us to see what there is to see. No telling what he might get into down here all by himself.”

“If I did not have such great respect for the fine laws of your region,” Chevalier says, “I would be most offended.”

“Why’s he got to be so French? I think he might just curtsy or whatever it is they do if we wait another minute.” It’s now that Jacob realizes what Grinkin’s doing—playing the part of the dumb hick to see if Chevalier lets something slip. His cheeks burn with guilt again, thinking about the time Grinkin will spend investigating the crime and what sort of flips his father might be doing in his grave. He wonders if he is visibly blushing. The men file outside to the fire escape. Jacob lags behind, following Chevalier’s heels to the roof.

“Nothing left behind, that’s for sure.” Grinkin crouches over the skylight and says, “Abel’s got what you need to board this up.”

“I’ll keep the shop closed and get to it this morning.” Though ½ the stores have yet to open, the heat is already unbearable. Jacob strips off his suit jacket and walks some yards off to the edge of the roof. His fear of the height stings his spine, but he feels he has to brave it; it’s the beginning of the punishment he will inflict for what he’s done. On the street below, a Tomcat has been caught in a carriage wheel and broken its neck. The driver yanks it free and tosses the body in the gutter before climbing aboard and driving away. When Jacob re-crosses the roof, he notices the Frenchman rubbing his toe against the shingling beside the skylight

“I’m going across the street to talk to the boy,” Grinkin says.

“I would gamble that you won’t find him there,” Chevalier replies. Jacob wants so badly to tell the Frenchman to his face that he knows what he did to the boy last night, but he shrinks from clearing Cecil’s name. The heat of anger and shame burns in his mouth.

Grinkin’s back turned, the stranger gives Jacob a most hideous smile; the man’s gum is rotted above a missing incisor. Jacob drops his gaze to the roof, and he sees the man lift the toe of his shoe, revealing the drops of blood beside the skylight.

F

Nora rolls her eyes when Emil says she is spending too much time alone, but she lets him sleep on one of the living room couches when he insists. It’s true there’s something in her that’s glad for his presence; still awake past midnight, she even considers going downstairs—if nothing else, just to hear him tell stories about Poland, a place to which she’s never really given a passing thought. Something stops her from going to him, though, and she sits sleepless beside the bedside lamp.

In the morning, Nora says she has to clear her head and still needs a final practice before her meet tomorrow. “You are still wanting to go?” Emil asks, and she tells him how she has to—how she’d otherwise not be able to compete all year and how no coach would take a diver who’s been out a year. He insists, too, on accompanying her to King College, and he is more comfortable with her on the motorcycle now, leaning so close she can smell the toothpaste on his breath before she pulls away from the driveway.

It is already almost 8:00 when she arrives, and the pool is brighter than usual, the sun angled more directly toward the windows. Emil sits in the bleachers, reading a thick book on nuclear physics; the sight of the pages—all Greek-looking funny letters and slender arrows pointing in steep directions—makes her feel cross-eyed. “You’re really going to study that your whole life?” she asks, and he replies, “You are really going to jump your head off that concrete slab?” At first, she is annoyed at his studiousness, but then she realizes she is reminded of Thatcher again and how he’d been obsessed with the stars and the planets, reciting the names of constellations as they lay naked on the far side of the stable, her mother gone to who knows where she used to go. Because of how much it hurt, and then because of Daniel, Nora had stopped answering Thatcher’s letters, and all she let herself know from Gaven is that he’s studying astronomy at Washington State. She’d thought, even after they lost touch, that he’d come back.

The janitor waves when he comes in to turn on the fluorescents.

Today, she has to decide whether she is really ready to attempt the arm-stand triple-tuck at the meet tomorrow. She won’t risk it unless she is certain she will land it, and this vanity is more for herself than for the coaches who will be deciding if they want her. She is trying to hide it, but Emil is right to ask if she still wants to compete—she isn’t sure she wants to go where it would take her, but she doesn’t want to exclude it as an option.

On the 10-meter platform, Nora tunes her thoughts to the cadence of the tepid water and raises her arms. Her mother’s engagement ring is still wedged onto her middle

finger. Her dives all go very well until she tries the arm stand triple-tuck and lands, like last time, completely out of position.

Cd

A few weeks after Emil arrived in Bristol last August, he had some trouble regulating his diabetes and wound up in Bristol Memorial. He remembers the old facility in the center of town as so much like the one in Gdansk, with slow elevators and speckled tile floors. Months later, in January, the name was changed to Bristol Regional Medical Center when the hospital re-opened in its new location alongside I-81, a hilltop building of merciless angles and endless glass windows.

Less than a week later, Dr. Mapp announced he'd be salvaging Beecham under the name King Pharmaceuticals.

Emil waits in the lobby of the hospital while Nora questions the receptionist. Even on this floor, the place hums with the pulse of machinery and reeks of overheated batteries and sour fluids. He is trying not to think of the 5 stories of injury above him; he thinks of the fact that his host parents will return from their vacation on Monday, and he will be subject to the 11:00 curfew again. He feels the hours he has left bend into themselves like neutrons, like nothingness, and the fact that it is August 12th and his flight to Warsaw leaves on August 30th is never out of his mind.

Nora crosses the lobby. "He's been moved from ICU like I thought."

"They will allow you to see him upstairs?"

“She knows me. She said no one else has come.”

“Where are the parents?”

“There’s just a mother. Maybe she’s at work.”

“For all this time passed? 2 days?”

“Just come on,” Nora says, and he follows her to the elevators, which are light and swift.

Anthony Green’s door is shut, and they can see through the narrow window that he is asleep, head bandaged and lip stitched.

Nora says, “Not even a dozing cop at his door.”

“What do you expect he will tell you?”

She ignores him and pushes the door open. By the time Emil double-checks the hallway, Anthony is already awake. “Yeah, I know you,” he is saying to Nora, “you the lifeguard.” Emil wonders if it is a pain medication or his split lip that makes his voice garbled. The room smells even more strongly of antiseptic and blood, a warm, metallic odor akin to solder.

Nora pulls a chair up to the bed and tells Anthony she knows he has nothing to do with Madeleine’s disappearance, her voice growing ever more soft as she promises him she is full of good intentions, and the boy lies there propped on pillows with his face tilted toward her, saying nothing until she has finished cooing at him, and then he clears his throat and says, “I’m done being polite. Get your own life.”

“I can keep a secret,” Nora says.

“If you really wanted me to believe that, you shouldn’t have shown up with some funny-looking guy wearing a suede jacket in the middle of August.”

Emil thought he was uncomfortable because of the hospital, but he realizes his ankles are itching fiercely. When he pulls up his jeans and digs in his sock, he sees the pink rash there and pulls his hand away. He recalls the long walk down the ravine to Blanton’s lake house. “I am going to locate some Zn carbonate.”

“Why’d that nurse let you in here, anyway?” Anthony says. He is covered to the chest with the bedsheet, and the cast underneath makes one limb look grossly bloated compared to the other. Emil is about to tell Nora to leave the boy alone when he says, “Anybody asking Dr. Mapp any questions?”

Hg

Emil had forgotten the heat outside until they exit the hospital and it hits them like a living gloom.

“This isn’t normal,” Nora says.

And, the digital sign above Twin City Bank on State reads 103° when they pass on her motorcycle. He has stopped feeling it, though, given their speed and the all-encompassing irritation of the poison ivy, until she slows as she approaches the Bristol sign, where a crowd has gathered beside the train station. Some of the people tout placards reading *Do You ♥ Bristol?* and *Save Our Families!*

Nora pulls up to the curb and asks the nearest person, “Is this about the Mapp girl?”

The man wears khaki pants and a Bristol Raceway T-shirt. “No, it’s Electrolux.

They look to be threatening to sell. They’ve laid off 75 employees.” He pronounces it like *implosion*.

Even Emil knows what this means: if the vacuum cleaner factory shuts down, the VA side will shrink again, and Bristol Compressors will be the only real industry left. Already, so many families have moved to Kingsport, hoping to get on with Eastman Chemical.

Am

In the morning long before he gives his exam, Daniel finds the social sciences office empty as he’d hoped and waits for the Xerox machine to warm up. What he’s about to do would make great archaeological scholars like Linda Schele rip his eyes out, but he can think of no other way.

He rests the last page of the codex face-down on the flat glass and scans each previous page so the copy will pile up in order.

But, the machine is slow, and when Dean Nehemiah Proskey comes in looking for his mail and asks what has him up so early, Daniel keeps his hands planted on the Xerox lid and says, “I’m making copies of my divorce papers.”

“She’s talked to you, then?”

Daniel frowns. “Excuse me?”

Prosky bends over to pick up some envelopes he's fumbled, his hands shaking. His bald head is a silver-white; he needs to have the stubble shaved. "I would have told you, but Mairi wouldn't let me. I wanted you to get through this month and all, and I didn't know she was trying to get pregnant. I thought she—"

Daniel's first instinct is to laugh. Maybe he will be angry later—maybe even some few moments from now—irrationally angry at Prosky for touching his wife with his stubby, clumsy fingers when she still was his wife, or angry at Mairi for choosing such a ridiculous donor to father her new baby, or maybe even more accurately angry at her for fooling this poor man. But, no, he wants to laugh, imagining his wife manipulating this man of 52; his parents had emigrated during WWII and this is what their struggle to survive has come to in a mere couple of generations: an aging mathematics professor who has contributed nothing of note to his field, seduced into driving over the state line to unwittingly knock up a woman a dozen children wouldn't fill.

But, no, Daniel doesn't laugh. He wonders what he is supposed to feel and guesses it is just failure and empathy—if he was to blame for some of Mairi's unhappiness, if this is the wrong fix for her, what would be better? He feels, finally, the permanence of being rid of Mairi, something he's toiled for even prior to Johnny's death, and instead of wondering what he could have done to make her happier, he starts to wonder why nothing makes him happy. He has kept his head down for so long, if asked what he most wanted, he wouldn't know.

“—and it’s just been so many years since my wife left me—” Proskey keeps talking, so preoccupied with his own justifications that he doesn’t seem to notice the strange text Daniel turns against the Xerox’ glass.

Lu

Jacob is afraid. Afraid of whether Chevalier will say he knows Jacob stole his own diamonds; afraid of what reason the strange man might have for not telling. After Grinkin returns to his office, Jacob calls on Abel and gets the materials to board his skylight. He works alone on the roof, stripped down to his undershirt where no one can see, cutting the board to the right size and hammering cross-planks into the shingling.

One thing’s right Grinkin had said. *Had to be awful lanky to fit through those iron bars.*

He spits and rubs out the blood stain beside the skylight. Chevalier lost his chance to point it out, though Jacob figures he would’ve done so an hour ago if he’d meant to. Is the man really from Paris? Is he faking the accent? If so, why?

Then, Jacob closes the shop, though he hasn’t yet straightened the office or even removed the broken glass. He heads home to tell Louise about the burglary. He doesn’t want her to hear about it from someone else and decide to head into town. He drives slowly down State St. with a frown, so as to look concerned but not hurried. Until Chevalier leaves town, everything Jacob does must be handled with care.

Re

“He didn’t look real worried,” Nora says. “Did you notice that?” She’s left her motorcycle at the edge of Anderson Park and sits on a picnic bench, gazing across the street at King Pharmaceuticals. The shade of the willows does little to cut the heat, and she guesses that is why no one else is in the park today.

Emil sits at the base of a tree some yards distant, pricking his finger and pressing his blood to the glucometer. He has his back almost turned to her, and she wants to ask him why he’s so sensitive about his diabetes, but she doesn’t. She is starting to understand him a little, and she guesses that his disease points at an imperfection in science that frustrates him. And, if she pries into his weak spots, she worries he will pry into hers—he still hasn’t asked her anything about Daniel.

Emil says, “Anthony was medicated, I am thinking.”

“Still.”

“You are not thinking you can go up in there.” The facade of the pharmaceuticals building is red brick with white columns and fancy scrollwork around the windows, too baroque for the sterile fabrication that goes on inside. As far as Nora can tell, Dr. Mapp’s car isn’t in the parking lot. He still drives a shabby Ford Taurus, trying to look like he’s not one of the wealthiest men in Bristol. He hasn’t made another plea on the news since Anthony’s beating, and the cameramen just shoot him going in and out of the Bristol, TN, police station. The search for Madeleine has spread, volunteers gathering to search the mountains behind Tara Hills. She wonders how the families in that neighborhood feel,

having vanloads of townies from the likes of Goosepimple Junction and Paperville pouring into their perfectly straight streets, poking through their petunias.

“No, I’m just thinking. Don’t you think it’s odd that Mrs. Mapp’s nowhere to be seen?”

“Yes.” Emil looks at the façade of King Pharmaceuticals. “But, she is maybe too upset to be seen now. I should have toured this laboratory.”

Nora sits in silence, just trying to think, and it’s not until she hears the click and sees the flash that she realizes Emil’s taken a photo of her, something that hasn’t happened—at least not this side of a swim meet—since Thatcher Matchman left town. “What’s that for?”

“So you will know what you look like when you are upset, too.”

Cf

Carrie Vulpe finishes her exam first and turns it in before the other students. She doesn’t say anything when she sets it on Daniel’s desk; she just squeezes his arm, smiles, and leaves.

He is in a hurry now. At the turn of the hour, he takes up the other students’ exams, corrects them there in the classroom, and fills out the final grades form. One more stop at the social sciences office to leave the sheet with the secretary and he is back at his apartment, unplugging his phone and packing the rest of his now-clean laundry into the turquoise suitcase.

He wraps the Ziploc holding the codex inside a pillowcase and tucks it in his backpack, and he checks the student directory before sweeping the room to make sure he's forgotten nothing.

At the top of the stairs, he considers leaving Nora a note, but he is afraid Mairi or Dean Prosky will come looking for him and read of where he's gone. He's certain, now, that she will tell Prosky about the codex if she hasn't already.

The heat outside is thickening though it's past 6:00 now; the sky is the stellar, silver-tinged blue of the Pacific. Daniel's car is still sitting, gas-less, on State St., where he plans to leave it. His cab will arrive at ¼ to 7:00.

He hefts the suitcase to the top floor of the women's dormitory, which is mostly empty, considering it is summer and few students take classes. He hears the stereo playing *The Cure* and knocks on the door, and Carrie Vulpe answers. If she hadn't been there, that would have been the decision made for him. But, she's in her room; she's standing in the doorway with her hair pulled into a neat ponytail and her face freshly washed, all the black eyeliner and crimson lipstick gone. Daniel sets his suitcase in the open doorway and asks, "Do you still want to get on a plane? I've got a pair of tickets to Guatemala, via California."

Th

At the house—now it feels like *her* house—there's a message from Gaven Matchman on the answering machine, saying *Don't worry, I'll be there at 5:00 in the*

morning.

“You can’t stay here tonight,” Nora says. “You can’t be here when he arrives.”

Emil tinkers with the Rn detector beneath the stairs and says, “The numbers are okay, but the light isn’t coming on to green. Are you certain this is in operation?” He unplugs the unit and removes its backing, babbling about the fact that the toxic gas comes from ^{238}U , but not until it becomes a ½-dozen other isotopes of Pa and Th and this-element and that-element, and that a single isotope of toxic Rn has a ½-life of less than 4 days.

Nora steps out of the kitchen and leans against the stairs. She can’t fathom the grip of Emil’s memory; she wonders if he is rare, or if he is like everyone schooled in Poland. She herself had earned a string of Cs at TN High; she just didn’t care for numbers or stories; it’s why she turned down the scholarship to Cornell; she didn’t feel the pull of anything she found in books as insistent as the tug on her skin during a reverse tuck.

She thinks of Daniel for the first time today; it has been more than a week now since they last had sex, and the memory of his cool palms on her back has already begun to fade.

She knows she should be going to bed. It’s past 10:00, and the noise from the Twin City Drive-In rolls against her windows. The sound of the Friday night crowd is just enough pine-muffled melody, perhaps, to lull her to sleep, and for a moment she wishes she could fall for the Polish boy, lead him upstairs, kiss the sore spots where he injects his insulin—but she feels nothing stronger than gratitude for his presence and

respect for his intellect. The best gesture she can muster is to stroke his hair and say, “You really don’t belong here, do you?”

Yb

I didn’t come to Bristol after that, really; Aunt Marie died in ’66, and the son was barely school-age by then, if I recall.

Lerato was still living with her mother. They’d managed to buy that house, and it would be all hers when the old lady died. Where else was she going to go?

Every summer after that, my father got me signed on to a paper route in Norfolk. When I started working on-train, I’d watch downtown change bit-by-bit: new, colored bulbs in the sign; the opening of the bagel shop; the re-opening of those loft apartments over Rite-Aid. After Annie died, I got off once and went to see the old neighborhood. Just that once. Actually, because the engineer said I was being so slow I was getting in everyone’s way and told me to take a break and he’d get me on the way back. So, I thought, sure, I’ll go see what’s left of the old house, and I was thinking about those dumb chickens Aunt Marie raised and how I’d probably never have the occasion to see another live chicken in my entire life—that my life was all about coal and steel and wrenches now—and I got up past Solar Hill and down off to the left of Moore St. and, sure enough, Aunt Marie’s house is so torn up it looks like an X-ray of what a house should be. Still standing, but missing the porch and the whole left side so you can look in and see the gutted kitchen and the bedroom upstairs and the teensy-tiny attic.

But, somebody's still living next door in Lerato's house, and at least the yard's still being mowed even if the shingles are laying around like spit teeth, but nobody answers when I go knock. And, of course, it's been so many years that everyone living nearby is new or so old they won't have a mind left to remember me. So, I'm just walking around in the heat with a good 8 hours to kill and no car and no friends, so I just mosey into the corner grocery and buy a milk and talk to the lady running the counter. She was maybe near 40 and looked like she'd been standing behind that counter so long she'd have a mark on her belly where she leaned on it, and she had a mouth that ran like a Mustang.

Good Christ! Let me just finish one leg of the story!

I need to preface, now: I've never been in love. Sure, I chased girls in high school and even put on a suit and oiled my hair for a few women over the years, but I never fussed when they moved on. I never had the *big dig*—never had that *I-have-to-kneel-at-your-knees* kind of urge about anyone, and I sure never found a woman who made me want to multiply her sweet self so much I'd think of getting her pregnant. And, from what that corner store woman told me about Lerato, I don't regret keeping so to myself. It got to be the worst for her sometime in the late '70s; by the time I was learning of it, her son had been gone at least a decade, so the woman said.

I don't know. Her last name sure wasn't Green; it was something South African.

Tl

Through the kitchen window, Jacob watches his son playing in the yard. The pines are still new, having been planted after the completion of the house, and their green boughs are short and ugly and do not sway in the late August breeze. Jacob wishes now that he hadn't ordered the trees to be arranged in such strict rows. Jackson Jr. runs figure-8s between them and falls dizzily on the dry grass.

"Should we have built closer to town?" Jacob asks. "He'd have other children with which to play."

Behind him, Louise frets with the lunch dishes at the washboard. He regrets what he's said; she will take it to mean he wishes she'd born him more children. He answers himself, "No, I'm wrong. His school friends will be happy to come here."

"Jacob, are you certain? If little Cecil did—"

"No, no. The boy is good."

Louise keeps at her dishwashing, her sleeves rolled to the elbow and her skirt swaying back and forth against the floorboards as she scrubs. She hasn't said much since he came home and explained the robbery, but he knows she is worried and will bolt the doors before bed. One of her clip earrings comes loose and drops in the sink and she murmurs, "Oops."

That evening, Grinkin knocks at the door. The town hasn't been able to afford an auto for him, and he arrives by horse. Jacob says he regrets the man riding so far and

would have checked in with him first thing in the morning, but the constable waves him off. They wait for Louise to serve coffee and then take it to the porch to talk.

“I couldn’t find Cecil Murry,” Grinkin says.

Jacob worries the arm of his rocking chair, running his thumbnail into the grain.

“Not at his mother’s?”

Grinkin shakes his head and re-traces his search—everything he’s done since Jacob left the shop that morning. The boy neither went home last night, according to his mother, nor showed up for work at the Olympic Theatre. “That foreigner’s been making a stir, I can say that much. Why did the boy have to play hooky today?”

“I trust Cecil much more than this Chevalier,” Jacob says.

“He does appear to drink a lot for a man who is supposed to be writing a book. Plenty of ½-worths down at the Nickel House enjoy a reason to harass a Negro. Of course, I can’t make the man stay in his hotel room.” Grinkin then asks for a full listing of all the missing items; he complains about the lack of clues in the shop; he says it is a lot of gemstones and one might turn up, even months from now. “Would you mind taking me back to town? I’d like to get there before too dark. Never know what kind of ruckus will sprout on a night like this. No moon and all. I’ll come back for the mare in the morning.”

“Of course.” Jacob leads Grinkin to the stable. While he cranks the T, the constable paces about and says, “Your father would’ve been so glad you decided to build. He always wanted a big piece of land. I think he stayed on State just because of the shop.”

“Yes, sir,” Jacob says. What he doesn’t say: the Polk townhouse had brought only a pittance when he finally sold, the grand families all having moved north during the recession. Had it not been for meeting Louise, he also might have left. Or, at least stayed on State, the walls built on the back of the railroad crumbling like the tobacco in his pipe.

The T rocks against the rough road and kicks up dirt. Grinkin jounces in the passenger’s seat and says, “Going to be more trouble with the farmers if we don’t get rain soon.” Jacob merely mumbles a reply, anxious to hear what din might soon be audible on State St. It’s that hour when the sky has begun to dim at the edges, but the streetlamps are not yet lit. He still hasn’t gotten used to the garish new sign above the tracks, visible now from the west end of the street. Grinkin notices it, too, and says, “Going to light it next Sunday after church, did you hear?”

If Jacob were anyone else, he’d be shaking every time the T hits a rut and causes Grinkin to grasp the edge of his seat, but even if the brilliants spilled out, the constable would refuse to believe they were hidden there by Jacob.

They pass the furniture shop and the tailor’s, the Olympic Theatre. Jacob slows the T in front of the Nickel House and follows Grinkin inside—to buy him a drink as a show of thanks. The room, too, is not yet fully lit; a single lamp burns across from the fireplace, and the air smells of kerosene. Only a few men sit at the bar: Doc Blanton, as usual; a few farmers; and the caretaker of East Hill Cemetery. The bartender isn’t there, and Grinkin asks, “Where’s Mr. Goodson?”

Doc Blanton wipes his mouth. “He had to step out for a moment, Constable. Said to help ourselves. How’s that neck of yours, Polk?”

“No worse. No better.”

“I see you’re still wearing the high collars.”

Grinkin steps behind the counter and pours himself a slug of whiskey. He tilts the bottle at Jacob, but he shakes his head. Blanton keeps picking at him: “Not even after the morning you had? Can’t say it’ll kill you.”

“Leave him be, Doc,” Grinkin says. The constable leans on the counter and stares down the men. “Where’s the Frenchman?”

One of the farmers shrugs, and Blanton giggles. The old man is 20 years Jacob’s senior and has the red nose of a compulsive drinker, but is in far better health, still, than Jacob. Grinkin pours the doctor a whiskey and chats about rain and tobacco and pesticides with the farmers, who are brothers. Jacob takes the stool on the opposite end of the bar, beside the caretaker, a young man barely into his 20s whose name Jacob cannot recall. The man hasn’t lived in Bristol long; he’d come from somewhere on the other side of Greenville to marry one of the farmers’ daughters, but she’d run away.

Jacob counts as Grinkin pours Blanton another whiskey, and another.

No one comes into the Nickel House, neither from the street nor from the boarding rooms upstairs.

When Blanton gets up and stumbles into the washroom, the caretaker says, “You don’t have to get him any drunker.”

Grinkin—he’s only sipped at his own shot of whiskey—says, “Why would that be?”

“Your foreigner brought the colored boy up to the cemetery over an hour ago. Had him tied to the stationmaster’s horse.”

Jacob coughs to clear his clenched throat. “You didn’t run them off?”

The caretaker shrugs over his ale. “They’re going to have their fun one way or another. I’m no one to stop them.”

Bk

What with the drawn blinds, Carrie Vulpe’s dormitory room is dark; only a desk lamp lights the space. It’s what Daniel expected her place to look like—black sheets on the twin bed; stockings spilling out of the dresser; the air foggy with incense and smelling of burnt silver.

Carrie picks up the turquoise suitcase and hands it back to Daniel. “I’m afraid not, Dr. Clifford.”

The bathroom door opens to the tune of the shower running, and a square of ice-edged light slices the room. Gabe Short walks out, wearing nothing but a pair of loose jeans; his thin clavicles filled with shadows. He smiles and rubs the back of his neck; he seems satisfied.

For months, it has been as if Daniel’s memory held nothing prior to the moment of Johnny’s conception; but, now, he remembers his own life at their age—those 4 airbrushed years at Berkeley—all the lovely women he’d kissed, all the late nights he fell asleep to the contented tempo of his own pulse.

In the dimness, Carrie mouths *I want to stay*.

Daniel hefts the suitcase. “I just came by to let you know you passed the class. Both of you.”

Eu

Emil steps outside to smoke on Nora’s porch. The night carries no haze, and he can name all the constellations: Orion, of course; Cassiopeia; the points of the summer triangle, Altair, Deneb, and Vega. He still notices how differently they lie compared to his view in Gdansk.

She’d touched him.

It was only her fingers sifting his hair, but she’d touched him. He hadn’t heard what she said, and she dragged her hand away when he reached up to meet it, but she’d touched him. He tries not to raise his hopes; he knows she is too fraught for anything to happen, and he expects he is too frail for her, even at her happiest. Still, should he have kissed her? He thinks of waking up in her bed, both of them scratching at their poison ivy.

Inside, she’s watching the 11:00 news. The red pulse of the TV flashes against the window. Emil’s cigarette smoke floats away, and he watches satellites slide between the constellations, dizzy with the tinsel of countless ores and metals refracting light.

Emil wishes he could convince Nora to ride with him and Keith tomorrow, and after wishing it, he feels guilty for not sharing her concern for the missing girl. From the beginning, he's wondered at the town's fear, only feeling certain she is somehow safe.

The sound of a car on the long gravel drive spills into the yard.

Emil stubs the cigarette out beneath his shoe and drops it between slats in the porch.

The headlights blind him momentarily. It isn't Keith's car, but Brian Blanton's van.

"He was with me when you called," Keith says. "Sorry."

"I'm not here for the Kraut." Brian bangs on the front door, and when Nora answers, he says, "You left your muddy footprints all over my boat."

Db

Nora had ½-expected Brian to show up with Keith, so she's prepared when he turns up on the porch with crossed arms and a pout, yelling about her leaving muddy footprints on his yacht. She chucks the Ziploc with the bathing suit at him, but he fumbles, and it falls on the porch. "Who's is that?"

The scar on Brian's forehead crinkles. "How should I know, everybody leaves their crap at my house."

"Right," Nora says. "But, you can't blame me for being upset. For wondering."

Brian just keeps his frown and begins to rant, his voice growing ever louder so that it overshadows the din of the Drive-In. He whines about being called into Anderson's office, about having to answer questions until his tongue went dry, about his father being notified that he was with Madeleine at the pool on Monday, about having to tell Dr. Mapp he'd never laid a finger on his daughter. "I'm sick of this shit," he says. "I hardly know that girl."

Emil leans on the railing and smokes, and Keith talks to him in a voice Nora can't hear. She wonders if they are talking about Gaven Matchman.

"You're leaving something out."

"What?"

"The part where you beat up Anthony Green."

Brian says, "Is that what he told you? It's bullshit."

"I went to see him at the hospital, but he didn't tell me that. I know your father, and I know you, and I'm sure you rigged yourself so he wouldn't recognize you."

Tm

She was sick even before her son got into the trouble. The woman at the corner grocery said she kept telling everyone the cough was related to allergies, but of course it was her lungs giving out—the house was full of asbestos. And, it was probably what killed Lerato's mother, too, but nobody knew asbestos caused cancer prior to '78, and even when Lerato took sick with it, her doctors wouldn't have guessed it was the roof of

her own house making her so. They just stared at the X-rays of her lungs and couldn't figure out why this woman-who-did-not-smoke had such buildup and no sort of shrinkage after the radiation. So, she already had that cough some years before the boy got into high school and started to make a real mess.

The corner store woman said he'd always been sour, what with all the whispers about who his white daddy was, and even none of the umpteen-other fatherless black boys in his neighborhood wanted much to do with him, and he'd just been spending too much time alone. Which just makes you selfish, you know? Makes you see only the places you see and even them in such a way that you can't imagine anyone seeing anything except the exact same thing. And, Lerato being so sick and generally unskilled at raising a child who had nothing of herself about him whatsoever—her speaking in that ½-British accent still and him coming home with *y'all-this* and *y'all-that* and all that 1970s slang talk about hep-cats and whatnot—

Well, yeah, I'm probably picturing it that way. The corner store woman said the son rolled his eyes when the mother spoke.

As I'm saying, everyone just sort of steers clear of the boy, and who knows what really is in his head and whether it bothered him or whether he wanted nothing more than to just keep living day-to-day without anyone in his way and no real motivation to grab anything—travel, money, nor woman—that might be dangled over his head.

And, he's in middle school before anything of note really happens. For a week straight, he doesn't show up at school. Takes the teacher or the principal or whoever a whole week before they bother to call on the mother and inquire as to his whereabouts,

which just makes it known that he played hooky plenty before. And, he's not at home for Lerato to question him when she first learns of this, but she's steamed, because she's still wearing those wool skirts and carrying her piles of books and papers back-and-forth to-and-from whatever work it is that she does, and the black man's opportunity to educate himself is nothing but the very thing she believes in. And, she cannot fathom what he has been doing all day when he ought to be in school—since he has no friends.

She sits there, coughing, waiting for him to walk through the front door.

I know, I know. I'm just trying to give you some sense of the story—I'm trying to set the tone.

He makes it home that night, and it's a Friday night the corner store woman knows, because like I said the school waited that whole week to bother asking about him. And, he tells her he's been watching the trains.

Watching the trains? All day everyday?, she asks.

He says yes ma'am or whatever it is, and she makes him promise to go on Monday. But, she walks to the school during her lunchbreak, and he's not there. She walks southeast to the passenger's station, which has been shut down not but a year or so by then, and she doesn't find him there, either. She's standing back behind the station right next to the tracks, and she looks up, and he's sitting on the railing of West Mary St. bridge, legs dangling over the edge. Just sitting as if in wait, right over the tracks. And, it's a ¼-mile distant from where she stands, so all she can really see is a black boy sitting up there, but she knows, of course, it's her son.

No, not Anthony. And, not something else South African, if that's your next question. Cecil. Named him after something in her white books, I guess.

Part of her wants to run that ¼-mile and grab him before he falls, and part of her just can't move. Maybe she's too scared, like if she looks away he'll fall, or maybe she wants to see what he's going to do; maybe once she hears the train coming in from VA, she already senses what he's going to do. Either way, she stands there with the fear or awe or whatever it is crystallizing in her knees, and the train's slowing but coming forth with a steady knock against the tracks, and sure enough, the boy jumps and lands on its back. It's not a far fall—maybe 6 or 7 feet of clearance for the lading, but still. He's practiced at it by then, though, and he gets to his feet quick and rides the train for who knows how long beyond where she stands, smiling down at her when he passes her by.

Tb

Daniel sits on his front porch with the turquoise suitcase between his knees, waiting for Bluebird Cab. He hadn't expected Carrie Vulpe to turn him away, and he sits for so long with the smog and fuel smell of poorly-running cars racing down Moor St. that he begins to cough.

Carrie and Gabe didn't sit next to each other in his classroom; they rarely spoke to one another. Is it a new affair? Is she using him to make the Chicago man jealous? Daniel feels foolish as ever—what had he wanted from the girl? Certainly not sex, not

after the shame he feels about Nora, but conversation? A travel companion? Indeed, perhaps, a research assistant?

It's 6:35, and Dean Prosky is walking across the street to the parking lot, the low sun reflecting off his bald head. Daniel can tell the man doesn't see him; Prosky lays his briefcase on the hood of his second-hand BMW, digging in his pocket for his keys. For all the man's age and cowardliness, Daniel admits that he has the kindness Mairi had stopped looking for in himself. Prosky's the kind of man who rounds his students' grades up and feeds stray kittens. He probably thought Mairi really cared for him; he probably asked her to marry him when she said she was pregnant.

Before Johnny died, Daniel had noticed his son had begun to mimic his own insensitivity. Mairi might not remember now, but when Daniel returned from Guatemala after his last winter dig, she'd complained Johnny was beginning to ignore her. *I told him to quit dropping his Cheerios on the kitchen floor, and he kept picking them out of his milk and letting them fall one-by-one as if I wasn't even there.* And, how many mornings had Daniel tuned out his wife at the breakfast table, as if he cared about Raytheon closing or the TN High diving team's performance or whatever else it was he'd pretended to read in the paper?

Such thoughts are what make him unhesitant about stowing his suitcase in the Bluebird Cab's trunk when it arrives. He watches V.I. and the student apartments and the housing projects slip across the passenger window, and it makes him feel better. He breathes more easily when he cannot see his apartment anymore.

No

“Go up Moore St. and over the bridge,” Grinkin says. “If they’ve got Cecil up the hill like the caretaker says at the unknown graves, they won’t see us coming from that direction.”

The T backfires, and Jacob has to kill the spark and re-crank.

There are no streetlamps past West Mary St. bridge, and they ride behind the dim headlamps toward East Hill.

The T hits stones in the dirt, and Grinkin says, “Maybe we should’ve borrowed Blanton’s horses after all. This thing sure makes a racket.”

Jacob tries to think of some way to tell the constable how Chevalier struck Cecil with the pistol, that it’s the reason the boy wasn’t well enough to work today, but he cannot think of a story that would justify his witness to it. Even if he wanted to lie and say he’d seen it happen at an earlier time in the night, Blanton and Everhart would contradict, and it would be obvious when—and from where—Jacob saw the beating. He grips the steering wheel and says, “Might need to cart the boy back to town.”

Neither of the men had wanted to waste the time to fuel a lantern, and the night has the spacelessness of a dark cellar. Jacob shuts off the T just inside the gate of East Hill, and once the headlights dim, he follows Grinkin, feeling his way among the graves toward the sound of whooping.

He still hasn’t climbed far enough to see, but he can smell smoke and hear the chirrup of burning wood.

Grinkin's breath goes short under the strain of the climb, and Jacob almost doesn't hear him say, "Only got the one gun."

At the rise, a hedge separates the main cemetery from the war graves. They pause a moment, and Jacob leans against a headstone while Grinkin loads his weapon. There is the merest of starlight there, tingeing the darkness with something akin to frost. Jacob stands again and realizes he's been sitting on a child's grave, that of Abel's son, who took ill of cholera at the age of 4. The sweat beneath his shirt gives him a chill; his own plot is some 10 yards west.

Grinkin leads him straight along the path between the hedges: there is no peeking ahead; there is no poking through the bushes. Grinkin halts before the rough circle of gathered men. Jacob recognizes Everhart and a few others, just men he nods to each Sunday at First Presbyterian. None of them matter; he can't see Chevalier. The flags replanted at each grave on Memorial Day already hang in the heat, faded by the long summer.

Grinkin addresses the men: "Your fathers rest here. You would disturb them so?"

Only a few of the nearest men bother to turn around; the others perhaps do not hear him above the crowd's laughter. Still, they have parted enough for Jacob to see Cecil on his knees beside a low fire; he's hunched over his hands so his forehead nearly touches the stones laid around the coals. Eli Everhart fans the coals with his suit jacket, his white shirt smudged with soot.

Grinkin takes a couple of steps forward. The gun's in his hand, but Jacob knows the man well enough to surmise he won't risk the backlash of a warning shot. "Eli, drop that jacket!"

The station master turns his head, a childish grin on his face before he realizes who has spoken. He hangs the coat over his arm. "I'm not alone here."

"Shut up," Grinkin says. A few of the men scamper down the ravine and run west on State St., back toward town. The others aim to pull Grinkin into their prank, saying things like *This here boy was cold* and *He's done fell in our campfire!*

Cecil's face shows traces of tears, but he's beyond that point now. He neither sobs nor shakes when Grinkin pulls him to his feet. He merely keeps his hands curled against his chest.

Jacob hasn't moved from the spot beside the hedge. The boy doesn't look at him; he looks at the moonless sky.

"What'd they do to your head?" Grinkin asks, and someone in the crowd says, "We didn't touch his head. That's not the part we meant to blight."

Grinkin tries to ease the boy's arms from his chest, but Cecil screams. The constable summons the sole lantern from the crowd. Jacob can't help but take a few steps toward the now-lit boy, drawn by the sight of his unfurling hands, which aren't hands anymore but strips of worm-pink flesh and spark-white bone. Prints remain in the bed of coals, and Jacob tries to count how many times they've forced the boy to press his hands into the fire. Chevalier edges his way into the circle, his beardless face bearing the

glow of a much younger man. He buttons his vest and says, “The brat will not thief again.”

“You will be the one to douse these coals,” Grinkin says. “Jacob, I’m taking your auto. If these men will not give you their names, I know enough of their faces.” The constable thrusts his Colt .45 at Jacob; the steel wet with sweat.

Cecil’s knees buckle after a few steps, the pain too much for him to move with, and Grinkin bends down and picks him up—cradling him the way Jacob would carry his son. For all his white hair and thick gut, Grinkin treads steadily through the hedge and disappears.

The boy will not tell, and it would be an insult for Jacob to fear otherwise. When Jacob begins to pay, it won’t be for Cecil’s silence—it’ll be for his own. For the Polk name; for the peace of Louise and Jackson Jr. He will atone in some way or another. He will slake the fire himself; he will carry away the kindling and now-empty kerosene pail; he will send the men home.

The men had planned carefully and brought a jug of water, and Jacob lifts it over the near-spent coals. The air thickens with steam and smoke. Some of the men cough and head for the street; another says, “I’m not afraid to give my name, or to say I started that fire with kerosene. Alfred Noll.” Others follow his example: Seth Goodson; Nathaniel Olson; and George, the not-yet-a-man who works for Doc Blanton. “You best go,” Jacob says. “He’s drunk. He’ll need your help with the boy.”

“Wake the nigger doctor up,” George says. “I’m not tending him.”

The fire now out, the lantern shines only enough for Jacob to distinguish the nearest faces. He points the pistol toward town. “That’s *my* shop. I didn’t ask for your vengeance.”

Everhart says, “It could be my office next.”

“You don’t own the station. Those men live in Richmond.”

Nothing left to say, their evening over so soon, the men carry the lantern down the ravine. The smoke clears from the rise and the cemetery reclaims the smell of rotting flowers. Jacob thinks of the new sign that will be lit come Sunday; it will light the spot where he now stands in darkness. He says it aloud: *A Good Place to Live*.

The Frenchman responds: “You will close your shop now.”

Jacob had forgotten the man, thought he’d left with the others. Jacob releases the safety of the pistol, meaning for Chevalier to hear the noise. Jacob squints and spies the man’s figure beside the willow—the first tree planted in East Hill. The Frenchman strikes a match and lights his pipe, his eyes downcast behind the flame.

Jacob clears his throat and asks, “*Etes-vous vraiment français?*”

“*Oui. En effet je suis.*”

He hasn’t practiced his French in decades; it takes him a moment to form the words. “*Pourquoi avez-vous fait ceci?*”

Chevalier sneers at Jacob’s pronunciation and responds in English: “Your theft was only an excuse. I have been meaning to do this some time. Each town I travel.”

Jacob’s throat clenches, and he cannot speak in English; his shame makes him want to hide his tongue, and he only repeats, “*Pourquoi?*”

“For my book.” Chevalier steps close, his nearness sharp with the smell of cherry tobacco and cologne, even walking toward the raised pistol as if he knows Jacob won’t fire. “Men have written of your lynchings, but this is the history of one who lives.”

Xe

Emil keeps his head down as his host brother explains: Brian Blanton did it alone, followed Anthony Green when he left Paul MacKenzie’s house on Wednesday evening. Green carried an empty duffel bag and took his friend’s car, drove across the state line, and broke into TN High.

Blanton hadn’t planned to follow Green. He’d just found himself driving band-and-forth past MacKenzie’s house.

“Why? He has said he does not care for her.”

Keith waves Emil’s cigarette smoke away from his face and says it’s difficult to explain Blanton—says that even if it were Emil who’d been in trouble, Blanton might get the inclination to avenge the slight. He says Blanton followed Green inside the school and watched him take boltcutters to the combination on Madeleine’s locker.

Emil tries to follow both conversations—what Keith’s telling him and what Nora’s accusing Brian of at the front door. His mind begins to slow, as if filling with seawater, and he knows now he injected too much insulin an hour ago.

“Anthony took everything,” Keith says. “He took everything out of her locker.”

When his sugars are low, he can't think quickly. He wonders how he has gotten involved with these strange people. In Gdansk, no one inhabits another's affairs in this way. For a moment, he misses home and looks forward to riding back into familiar Polish streets, seeing the *SS Soldek* anchored in the Motława River, walking at the brink of the Baltic. "What would there be in her locker at this summertime?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is, Brian's got it at the lakehouse." Keith tells him, then, of how Blanton followed Green back to the parking lot and meant only to take the bag, of how he hit Green with a flashlight from behind and then couldn't stop kicking him, of how he stomped on the boy's knee.

Emil doesn't say that Nora visited Green; he doesn't ask why Blanton would admit what he'd done. He searches his pocket for his glucose tabs.

Still standing in the doorway, Nora turns on the porchlamp. The light of the bare bulb makes a static-laced ring against the dark; Emil squints into her inscrutable face. Her voice halts Brian: "There is no excuse. Go home."

Hs

Emil cracks the window in Brian's van. The flickering lights of the Drive-In do nothing to quell his mind. He closes his eyes and rubs his face. When his sugars are low, he feels faint and runs his mouth: "What things could she say to you? Will you get in trouble? Do you think she will dive good tomorrow?"

"Shut up, Kraut."

Keith says, “Call him that one more time—”

“I just want him to shut up.”

“Let me tell you a thing about Germans,” Emil says. “They know some things.”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Brian turns on the radio glued to the dash; there’s only static.

“They steal from us first. Marie-Maria-Marie was Polish. I would have love her.”

“Just ignore him,” Keith says. He has the glucose tabs now; he leans over the seat and tosses a couple in Emil’s lap. “He doesn’t know what’s he saying. He’ll quit in a minute.”

“I am years of 18, I am a stable man. I am not a quitter. I do not beat these people. Why won’t she kiss?”

Nb

It’s 4:55 a.m. and Nora sits against her front door in the still-dark, beside her duffel bag. She slept little over an hour, and she knows she won’t perform well. She knows she might hit her head again; she knows she might refuse to dive.

The familiar sound of Gaven’s station wagon splits the dark before his headlights.

He wears torn jeans and a green T-shirt and is still quiet with sleep. He sips black coffee from a Thermos and offers her a cup. She tells him she doesn’t want it; she tells him she’ll be too jittery.

“Never bothered you before,” he says.

Nora’s diamonds—they are hers now—are rolled in a pair of socks in her bag. She’s been carrying them since Thursday; she isn’t sure why. She just feels she needs them at arm’s reach.

From Volunteer Parkway, Gaven heads west toward Blountville and I-81. The road is vacant, and only one other car passes before they reach the interstate. Nora knows she will have to be patient and wait for the right moment to mention Madeleine Mapp. Not until ½-way to Knoxville, when the sun begins to steel the mountain edges, does she try to turn the conversation in the direction of confessions: “I won’t be seeing the professor anymore.”

“Good.”

“I don’t know what I was doing with him. I don’t know what I could have done for him.”

“You can’t stay away from the losers. I bet he wasn’t even good in bed.”

Nora says, “I’ve got enough today, you know.”

“Since Thatcher left, you’ve gone from one pity case to the next, and it only got worse after your mom. You already know this, I guess.”

“Sure. Just like how you never give it a go with anyone.”

“That’s fair.” He tries to settle more comfortably in the seat—unhooks his wallet chain and tosses it on the dash.

Nora sits back and lets the car go silent for a few moments before asking, “What do you think happened to Madeleine Mapp?”

Gaven shrugs and puts on his sunglasses. “I think they aren’t going to find her.”

“Did you know her?”

“Did you?”

“Don’t do that.”

“Just tell me what you want to know, Christ Almighty.”

“Why was she giving you money at Clear Creek?”

Gaven lets his foot off the gas and eases into the shoulder of the road, narrowly missing an outcrop beside the asphalt. He drums the top of the steering wheel and says, “You’re not the only one with complications.”

“I just want to know so I can forget her.” Nora wonders, though, if she could; even if the girl were safe, whatever Gaven knows might be more memorable than a naked girl in a ditch or a body floating facedown in a pool.

“You got to keep your mouth shut.”

“I’ve never not kept our secrets.”

“The money wasn’t for me. It was for me to put in a safe place.”

“Where’s she now? How far away?”

Gaven picks at a cigarette hole in his T-shirt. “I don’t know.”

“Liar.”

“She wanted to disappear. Why would she tell me?”

Nora thinks in threads: where could she be? When might she be found? Does a stomped-on knee sound like crushed ice, or a woman weeping? Why didn’t the Polks

before her sell the diamonds? She rubs her face and says, “You can let Anderson know somehow. You can let them know she’s run away.”

“And give her dad a chance to find her? Put it together like I know you can, babe. She’s knocked up. When the good doctor found out, he called an out-of-state friend for a you-know-what.”

“Who’s is it?”

Gaven’s still wearing his sunglasses, but Nora can imagine the steel-colored disappointment in his eyes. “You don’t need me to tell you that.” He flips the turn signal, speeds up in the shoulder, and merges back into the thickening traffic.

When he veers from I-81 to 40 some miles east of Knoxville, he speaks again: “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Vanderbilt,” Nora says. “It’s at Vanderbilt.”

“I think that’s our snitch.” Gaven adjusts the rearview mirror. “Housman drives a gray pick-up, right?”

Nora nods and slips down in her seat; soon, the questions spill out of her head and she is asleep, ½-dreaming of a strange woman with 7 daughters and 7 sons who is weeping and won’t say why.

Lr

The 5-meter competition is already underway when Nora arrives. She looks over her shoulder, but Gaven disappears into the bleachers. She has plenty of time—the 7-

meter hasn't even started, and she's registered for nothing but the 10.

The crowd at the V.U. pool momentarily makes her nervous—it lacks the familiar symmetry of high-schoolers and their parents. There's too much commotion; people climb up and down the bleachers and move in circles counterclockwise about the pool, squeezing by the 5-judges table and making a din only briefly broken by the burst of scores on the PA. The invitational's open to anyone 16 to 28; some of the divers are taking off their wedding rings.

Nora's only dived here once before. Since then, the pool's been lined with new green tiles that tint the water jade. Even the swim-lane ropes have been removed; the pool swallows one diver after another.

She tries to find a quiet corner in the dressing room to stretch, but already a couple of trainers have tracked her down and asked whether she's yet committed to anyone. The Vanderbilt lady swim coach is there too, recruiting a new representative for the SEC championships. Nora shakes her head: "I don't want to go to school." Once rejected, the woman sneers and says, "You should've been in a Club a long time ago, then. You're too old to start the seniors fresh off springboard."

Nora twists her still-dry braid into a knot and walks away, dive sheet in hand.

In the swirl of bodies and noise, Nora pushes her way behind the video cameras to the registration booth. She fills in the final blank with the number for the armstand triple tuck: 616C.

There are 33 women, and Nora is 19th in the rotation. Since it's a qualifying, they each get 10 dives, one less than the men, who also get to go last. Some of the women

shouldn't be here and will embarrass themselves when they flub dives as easy as inward-pikes. Most of them loiter around the tower steps with Club coaches who hold their robes and rub their shoulders.

Nora is alone. As close to the wall as she can get, she keeps her track suit on and goes up and down on her toes, waiting for the 10-meter qualifying to commence. She's forgotten by now that anyone's in the stands for her, thinks neither of Gaven nor Keith and Emil, doesn't even wonder if Blanton rode with them or stayed home. Nora blends into the background and eats her pre-dive banana, like always.

Some of the crowd has already left, and there's more movement when the 7-meter ends and final scores are tallied.

Most of the other women line up at the tower steps to practice warm-up dives before the judges call time. Nora doesn't; she always uses her first scored dive as warm-up. Most competitors like to start with something intimidating, something to catch the judges' attention right away, but not Nora. It's just one in a chain of superstitions: too many eyes on her at the beginning, and she'll be sure to disappoint.

Nora doesn't watch, exactly; she rolls her shoulders and keeps her eyes only on the water, sizing each diver's splash. There's an Asian girl she knows from high school meets and a red-head with head-to-toe freckles she's heard of, but the others are strangers.

Her number up, she rubs her feet on the concrete platform and begins with the back somersault. Approach, flight, and she lets her heel fall loose to cause extra splash on entry. Like always, she plunges further than the dive and touches the bottom of the

pool for luck. The score's already being announced when she climbs the ladder. It's low, and she keeps her head down to hide her smile.

She feels fine; she feels like she's slept 12 hours and just woken.

Something happens: she gets into the rhythm of the rotation and tunes out the scores. Her heels grip each other, her splash thins. Each dive is tighter than the last; it's as if the water draws her like a penny to the bottom of a very straight well.

By her 7th turn, she knows this is the last she'll ever compete. No matter the scores, she'll walk away without a coach, without a schedule of meets for the next year.

Still, it's not until she goes up on her hands that the slightest hush falls over the bleachers. The V.U. mural is a blur of black and gold; held breath sits upside-down and heavy in her lungs. She counts to 3 and shifts her shoulders, grabbing her knees as she falls, and there's Gaven's voice calling out to her as the intense pain of the rip—that rare, splashless entry—pinches her chest. She comes out grinning with red palms and stinging eyes and a strained shoulder, but Gaven's there holding her towel at the ladder.

Nothing's changed: same pale skin and long, dark hair; same green T-shirt with the same cigarette-hole burnt into the hem. She's chasing her breath and can't swallow enough to ask what he's doing or why he's kissing her, so she lets him wrap her up without a word and lead her to the bleachers. He tucks her in the crook of his arm, and he is rubbing her shoulders and saying *How do you like that?*, but she doesn't even feel the pain of it—and she doesn't hear her score, either. She just looks up when she feels like she can't take it any longer, and she sees another faceless diver on her hands 10-meters up, but something isn't quite right—and Nora asks, "Why is she facing that way?" and the crowd is really

stomping now, because the woman is nailing her own triple-tuck—only hers is backward and doubly-difficult.

Kr

Keith points across the pool to a man wearing a green T-shirt and sitting alone on the bottom bleacher. “That’s him, if you want to know.”

Emil watches Gaven Matchman, who seems intent on watching Nora. The man balls his fists until each of Nora’s scores appears on the screen above the judges’ table. Emil feels like a 2nd hand spinning on a wristwatch, like light bounced inside a glass bulb. “I didn’t know he was so older. Do you trust him?”

Keith shrugs. “She does.”

As Nora takes to her hands, Emil raises his camera to his right eye and snaps Gaven’s picture, too, in high-speed.

Fm

Somewhere over New Mexico, Daniel sits in a window seat of a 747 and studies the Xerox copy of the codex. It’s dark now, but he brought no watch and doesn’t know the time. The other passengers are sleeping or listening to headphones, and the flight attendant has long ago served beverages and disappeared.

Still, he squints over his translations. The shell-shaped symbol for the number 0——repeats throughout the text. He thinks the writing explains this: A bone and a knife collects a sun and a moon and makes 0.

He scratches out his words and flips, again, to the beginning.

Dy

Lerato's boy gets older, like anyone else. He's in high school now, and most nights, she can't even find him. He's hard to get at, has a mind like a closet nailed shut. She doesn't pry at it too hard. Since she saw him jump that train, she thinks he's out to destroy himself. She opens her hand and gives him yards and yards of slack.

By the time he's in his third year at VA High, her lungs are so bad she can't work anymore. She shuffles around in her socks now and sits on the porch, choking on fresh air.

He never asks her anything, much less who his father is, and she doesn't tell him. Maybe she leaves that bit of information in her will; maybe there's a smart neighbor who paid attention who's waiting for her to die to tell him. I doubt it; I don't think anyone thought of him enough for that. And, I doubt it would've changed his direction.

The last fight they have: he wants to quit school. He says somebody's offered him a job at Holston Steel up there behind Solar Hill. She tells him no—not while he's still a month shy of 17 will she allow such a thing on account of they aren't hurting for money since she's collected some savings somehow and stopped throwing it away on

doctors. And, he's saying *I ain't got no choice, I ain't got no choice*, and she starts screaming at him for purposefully using bad English on top of all the insults he's throwing in her face, yelling so the neighbors can hear, and she winds up coughing herself onto the floor.

Couple of days later, a woman comes and says her daughter's pregnant and Lerato's son did it and that's how come he has to take the job.

It's a mild November, and Lerato wraps herself up in a blanket and walks out on the porch, and that's when your officer with the ponytail returns. He's in street clothes and in his regular car, but everyone knows him by sight, and whoever didn't know before knows now. He holds the car door open for her, and she gets in, and she never comes back.

I haven't a clue about that; the names aren't important. All the woman at the corner store said was that it was a boy, too.

Cm

½-asleep, Daniel begins to understand the narrative as the plane crosses the border into Mexico. With some insertions for sense, the glyphs slip into English, one after another, beginning: A day with its night shaves at a bone in the sky.

Sm

Neither Jacob nor anyone else sees Cecil again. The next morning, the Frenchman, too, is gone, though some will swear they saw him peering into the doctor's window before dawn.

Doc Blanton says *There wasn't enough flesh to heal.*

Once the boy recovers from the double-amputation, kin in VA come for him and his mother.

On another night with no moon, Jacob rides to their house and boards the single door and the pair of windows shut to keep out squatters and animals.

As his guilt grows beside the cancer in his throat, he becomes more sensitive to light. Even a white candle's reflection in a window feels like a spotlight. One morning in mid-September, he's so blinded by the sun after a week's worth of rain that he almost blurts what he's done in front of Louise. Only the thought of sparing her this heaviness as long as he can causes him to clamp the silence between his teeth. Always, he tells himself he is paying what's due. He considers selling the diamonds and sending the money to Cecil, but he's disgusted that he thinks he can buy some last glimmer of peace.

Doc Blanton says *The cancer's spread to the bone.*

Jacob can't keep his illness secret from Louise any longer, but they tell no one else. He hires the caretaker—the young man's name is Gardner, and he is decent—to apprentice in the shop. Jacob teaches him to size rings and set stones.

He grows thin on the drugs Doc Blanton prescribes to ease his pain; eventually, he stops taking them, but his appetite doesn't return.

Jacob gives Gardner a ½-carat diamond so the young man can marry a farmer's daughter named Olive. Jacob and Louise and Jackson Jr. ride out to the wedding picnic, and everyone bathes in Holston Lake. Gardner and his bride are both strong swimmers; Gardner dives alone off Badaman's Rock. By January, Olive is with child.

By January, Jacob cannot get out of bed.

The T sits for weeks, undriven, in the stable.

Jacob orders the sale of his mare, Penny, to leave some cash for Louise and Jackson Jr. He stows the bills and a note about the brilliants in a box and wraps it with brown paper and string. He tells her not to open it until he's underground in East Hill. Always, she sits on the edge of the bed and worries her wedding ring.

Er

Nora wakes up, outside; it is not yet hot, and she lies under the quilt with the peculiar chill of having slept in the grass. Beside her, Gaven sleeps still, and his steady breath against her shoulder is the only thing that stirs. She doesn't want to wake him yet.

Even when she used to sleep every weekend here, behind the stable, she never noticed how rose the firmament becomes before the sun. She knows why she never noticed; she was happy enough to see the pink of Thatcher's lips, then, as he woke and smiled. She almost says his name before she catches the word in her mouth.

She wonders where Madeleine is this morning, wonders where the girl slept. Neither Nora nor Gaven spoke of her on the ride home yesterday evening. Gaven kept a hand on Nora's thigh as he drove, but the pain in her shoulder and the thought of Anthony Green's split lip left her cold. Maybe that's why she didn't mind him touching her—anything to take away the chill. After they carried the blankets outside, after she stripped off his jeans and her swimsuit, he lay on his back and held her hips and spoke, like his brother so many years ago, of astronomy, told her to look at the metallurgy in the black, black sky. He said *I haven't seen a night like this in so long*.

She wishes she'd never shown him the diamonds. She wishes she could bury them beneath the stable.

When Gaven wakes up, he puts his lips to hers and says, "Are you regretting this yet?"

She puts her arms around him and presses him to her chest, hoping he can sound out the throbbing that goes *can't, can't, can't* against her sternum.

Tomorrow's another Monday; there are more pine needles beneath them than minutes.

She isn't sure which thought he's responding to when he pulls a caterpillar out of her hair and says, "I know."

Md

Emil sits again in the attic bedroom window, watching Keith drive off into

another dry evening. It's not over yet; his host brother's heading to Brian's lakehouse to see what may or may not be in the contents of Madeleine Mapp's locker.

Emil predicts nothing will come of it; he predicts Anthony Green is only in love.

Keith told him everything about Thatcher Matchman on the long ride home from Nashville: how he and Nora had chased each other up a high, blissful hill; how she fell like a wishless penny in a well when he left; how Gaven had brought her back to the surface. Emil doesn't feel envy or even disappointment. It's only fitting that she found someone after searching so long.

Still, he wonders if she has already forgotten him. The attic smells of newsprint and cedar; of course he's thinking of lost time.

Even Mendeleev, father of the Periodic Table—how many remember him?

Emil's parents work together at a glass factory on the southern edge of Gdansk. He is ashamed of the 10s of 1,000s of *zlotych* they saved to send him to America; even if his exchange year will secure him a place in a better university—perhaps even over the border at Darmstadt—he will always know its worthlessness.

On the TV, the news of tomorrow's lay-offs at Holston Steel has replaced Friday's news of the lay-offs at Electrolux. The Mapp girl's disappearance is now only the third story of the broadcast—the volunteer search has been called off. *Authorities are again questioning the Club's tennis pro after learning Mrs. Beaumont ended their affair just prior to Mapp's disappearance.* Emil turns around to look at the screen. He remembers the blonde, tan man with the big wristwatch who spoke to Nora at the Club last Tuesday.

Already, it is last Tuesday, and Nora's in the past.

Still, it's only ½-past 9:00. He has 16 days left before his time runs out. He goes downstairs to the kitchen, boils frozen pierogies, and injects his insulin.

Es

After stumbling out of La Aurora International in Guatemala City, Daniel checks into a hostel and sleeps into the night. He wakes up starving and walks to a café with a broken clock and a curved bar.

Through the un-paned window, he can see the University of San Carlos tucked into the mountain.

He finds his Spanish still practiced, and the woman at the counter offers him her best fish; its eye is black and has no stars in it. He eats it and drops the clean bones in his plate. Next door, he buys bottled water. He returns to his rented bed and sleeps again until morning, dreaming of a woman with 7 dead daughters and 7 slain sons. Just before the woman turns to stone, she says, "It's all relative to your relatives. How do you know today is not yesterday?"

Sg

Nora and Gaven are on the 2nd floor. Nora sorts through each of her mother's boxes for the few items she wishes to keep, and Gaven carry the furniture downstairs.

Tomorrow morning, they will load the clothing, the bedding, and the nightstands into his station wagon and haul them to the Salvation Army.

Gaven plans to stay the night in Nora's house. She looks forward to his company; they might do anything, and the hours are still strong as wolfram. She smiles, hearing him moving about the living room below.

Nora unpockets the velvet pouch and wraps it in gold foil. She carries her mother's hatbox upstairs to her room and slides it under her bed.

She meets Gaven again on the 2nd floor. They hear the engine of Nora's XR750, and he asks, "Who's that?" When he leans to the window, his breath fogs the glass.

Nora isn't bothered; she says, "It might be someone Polish."

Rf

Emil has never stolen anything before. The motorcycle sends a trill up his arm. He admires the precision of the engine; for all its age, it runs without stutter. He circles downtown, looking for somewhere to go.

Of course, Gaven's station wagon was parked in her driveway. He wonders if she will come after him.

He passes the train station and crosses the border again into TN. On the backside of the post office, he thinks of the man who first recognized the consistency of ½-lives, how he'd said *In science there is only physics; all the rest is stamp collecting.*

Emil's driving too fast to notice Dr. Mapp leaving the post-office. He's still in his gray suit, carrying envelopes full of wholesale orders. At his car door, he pauses, looking at the gold band on his left hand.

Nothing is open on either side of the state line. Even the freshly-broken ground for the new war memorial doesn't capture Emil's interest. He wants so badly to discover—*something*.

Mt

It isn't difficult for Emil to break into King Pharmaceuticals. The building was once King College, before an endowment from the Andersons allowed the purchase of the expanded school grounds.

The windows are original and easily pried.

He's let himself into the warehouse; white boxes line the metal shelves. He squints at the labels and doesn't recognize the drugs: Kemadrin; Ketalar; Skelaxin.

He winds his way to the basement lab. The amount of equipment overwhelms him—beakers and tubes the likes of which he's never seen; microscopes and glass droppers; gas jets and crucibles. Why hadn't he come here before?

Stacks of glass slides line the counter. Emil un-pockets his extra syringe and releases some of the insulin onto a slide; he plugs in a microscope and lights it. Only the faintest shapes appear in the solution, but he knows what's there. C and H and O and N, bonded with Zn. Such common elements—but his pancreas doesn't produce them.

The noise of footsteps above halts him; he turns off the light of the scope and listens to the steps recede up a staircase. He checks his watch: ½-past midnight. Why would anyone be here this late? Maybe a security guard. Once it's quiet again, he slips out the way he entered.

In his office, Dr. Mapp lies under a blanket on the couch. He wonders when his wife will let him come home. An hour later, still unable to sleep, he walks in his undershirt and boxers to the basement. He frowns, unplugging the microscope someone's left at the counter.

Bh

It's the end of January, and Jacob refuses to let Jackson Jr. visit his bedroom. The boy has turned 7, and his hair has begun to darken like all the Polk men of the past. Louise frets and says she can't watch the boy day and night; she says, "He's got it in his mind to see you."

Jacob has a fever, and he sweats into the white linen.

Later, Louise changes into her dress skirt and takes their son to a church meeting. Jacob knows she's really going for Doc Blanton. He wraps the bedsheets about himself. It takes him 22 minutes to climb the 13 stairs to his attic study. He turns the key from inside the door and makes his way to the sofa. Lying under the window, he can watch the moon's orbit. He becomes dizzy and falls in and out of sleep, dreaming of 7 sons whose arms end at the wrists; they chant *There are some things so serious you have to laugh at*

them. He wakes and wishes he'd stopped for a glass of water. He falls asleep, now thinking it fitting that he suffer without water.

Jacob wakes again when Doc Blanton and Louise bang at the study door and call for him to turn the key. He can't lift his arms; he just lies there and listens when Blanton breaks the lock. Jackson Jr. runs into the room, points a wooden rubberband gun at him, and says *Bang-Bang*.

Pt

Daniel doesn't climb the hill to the University of San Carlos. He boards a train that takes him to the outskirts of Tikal; he finds a bus to carry him into the interior.

The civil war is winding down; it is the first time he's traveled outside Guatemala City alone.

Moss and grass grow over the steps of the pyramids; the limestone is so old it appears to weep silver.

There are few tourists in the 12:00 heat. He wraps linen around his forehead to catch his sweat. He hefts his bag and follows his map to the Cave of the Witch, where he buries the codex in unturned soil.

Po

Emil heads in the direction of East Hill Cemetery. He stops in the parking lot of a defunct textile mill to check his sugars, but realizes he's left his glucometer in the basement of King Pharmaceuticals.

The XR750 keeps a steady pulse beneath him, and he injects the rest of his insulin.

He doesn't know it's Paul MacKenzie passing the parking lot in his father's car; he doesn't know it's MacKenzie's driving Anthony Green toward I-81. He doesn't know his sugars are about to dive.

He's in a hurry to retrieve his glucometer; but, even with that concern, he is happy. His chest goes light on the steep hill before the Bristol sign, and the train sounds like weeping as it slows. Keeping his speed, he beats the safety bars beside the passenger station. The XR750 fishtails, and he puts his foot down between 2 rails.

Ac

Yes, Lerato's son goes to work at Holston Steel. The girl moves into Lerato's house, and the baby boy is born. Still, Lerato's son is only 17; he comes home with blue dust in his hair, and he smells like pitchblende. His now-wife can't keep the bed linen clean.

Maybe the baby cries too much; maybe he doesn't love the girl. Maybe the steel is too heavy. Who knows?

One Sunday, he says he is going out for cigarettes. The corner store woman is at Twin City Bank. She sees him sitting on West Mary St. bridge. It's only then she believes Lerato's story—believes the boy rides on top of the cars. She waits a while to see it happen, but no train comes. She has to get back to the store; she is only 19, and her mother is waiting for her.

Lerato's son doesn't come home that night. He doesn't show up Holston Steel the next morning. After work, some of the better neighbors carry flashlights and walk north along the rails to see if he fell off; they find nothing but gravel.

The girl keeps the house and raises the baby. For a while, she has another husband, but he leaves, too.

I think she's still there—alone with Lerato's grandson. She was that day I visited the old neighborhood.

How did we get this far off track?

Which story is worse? If you came here to feel better, I guess it didn't work.

Pr

Nora waits on the sidewalk while Gaven carries her mother's belongings into the Salvation Army. It's impossible to miss the commotion beside the train station, and she walks in that direction.

Gaven has decided to leave town for a while, maybe to visit his brother.

The train station's roof is the green of oxidized iron. Officer Purchase stands beneath the Bristol sign. He isn't on duty. He wears jeans, and his ponytail swirls when cars pass. He is watching 2 men load wrecked metal into a dumptruck. Strewn gravel fills State St.

Nora asks, "What's that?"

"Motorcycle. Train going to Knoxville." Purchase takes off his sunglasses and squints against the sun. "Lost a boy last night."

Nora knows it's her XR750, but she asks the men to let her look. The metal's unrecognizable.

She finds the cigarette lighter in the gravel; she rubs grit from the carved *E*.

A flyer with Madeleine Mapp's 10th grade photo lays there, too, ripped by the train.

Nora returns to the Salvation Army. Gaven's left the keys in his station wagon. She turns the ignition, buckles her seatbelt, and heads toward I-81. She doesn't watch him growing smaller in her rearview mirror.

She doesn't see it when the light of the Rn detector beneath the stairs turns green.

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VITA

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