A House Made of Stars

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DEDICATION

To my cousin,
Nickie

my grandmother,
Joanie

my sister,
Brittany

and my love,
Brian.

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ABSTRACT

In *A House Made of Stars*, a coming-of-age story set in a small community in the San Bernardino Mountains of Southern California, a young girl and her family endeavor to start their lives anew after being uprooted from their home. Plagued with poverty, they attempt unusual and, at times, unscrupulous ways of making money including setting up a trash can business, going on scavenger hunts around the neighborhood for food, stealing from the church kitchen, and finally, soliciting donations for a fake deaf charity. However, the girl soon discovers that her family's difficulties stem not from outside factors, but from within their own household--from an abusive father and a mother who covers up all these things at the cost of her family's happiness and safety. The girl and her sister are also deaf to varying degrees and are forbidden to sign, but in time, struggle not only in learning how to grow up, but also in finding their voices and learning to speak for themselves and their family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Fragments of Experience:
Short Forms as a Reinvention of Narrative Structure

While narrative forms in fiction have undergone various transformations over the course of recent history, branching off into smaller and more specific categories, the most recent evolution is one concerning very short fiction, or short forms[1] as they will be called in this introduction. As narrative models evolve, so do their narrators and what constitutes as the growth process for these characters in a novel or short story. Rather than ending with the procurement of a wealthy estate or a marriage or the birth of a child as depicted in earlier classic fiction, contemporary fiction has moved beyond such neat and tidy advancements for its characters and this movement reflected in narrative form. While short forms have been experimental in their early use, short forms are quickly becoming more mainstream in contemporary fiction, because these forms allow narratives to be told in a way that better represents the growth and maturation of a character—a process that is disruptive and sometimes, not yet finished. These forms also offer moments of growth through snippets of discoveries and realizations and portray this learning process as just that--a process that does not culminate in a single moment as fiction of years past would lead audiences to believe. Better yet, these short forms allow readers to experience the growth process as it happens through stories in the here and now that are not yet finished, but rather ongoing.

Although the novel form has always and continues to dominate fiction, the short form has made its place in history. Robert Shapard, who writes about the historical origins of very short

[1] In 2011, *Bellingham Review* chose to group all shorter works together for an issue dedicated solely to flash fiction/prose poetry/flash non-fiction up to 1,000 words and called these "short forms." While there are distinctions between prose poetry and flash fiction/non-fiction, I believe this term to be the best and will utilize it through this introduction. The examples I provide later in this introduction also come from multiple genres, some authors even blurring the lines between genres, so I believe this to be the best choice when referring to such forms.

fiction in his article, "The Remarkable Reinvention of Very Short Fiction," maintains that short forms were first used in Ancient Rome by Petronius, then by Marie de France during the Medieval period (48). While the short form was certainly not mainstream, especially after the novel became the dominant form of storytelling, it has cropped up intermittently throughout history, more so in the twentieth century in the works of Borges, Cortázar, Walser, Kafka, Buzzati, Calvino, Dinesen, and Kawabata (Shapard 48). In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, anthologies solely dedicated to short forms began to be published and with the use of the Internet becoming mainstream, short forms experienced its greatest growth period yet (Shapard 49).

While short forms originally experienced hesitancy from scholars in being considered a serious literary endeavor, these boundaries are also breaking as more authors are becoming successful in publishing short forms in both literary journals and their own collections. Small presses have taken the lead in publishing such collections by Meg Pokrass, Sean Lovelace, Amelia Gray, Kathy Fish, Tania Hershman, Tara L. Masih, and xTx among others with more quickly joining the ranks in welcoming such writers. As these authors garner more attention and praise from the literary community, earning places in the Best American Short Story, Best of the Net, and Pushcart anthologies, they pave the way for short forms to become a permanent part of contemporary literature.

However, along with such popularity for these short forms comes the need for more guidelines for how such a genre should be named and defined. Up to this point, these short stories were called short shorts or flash fictions, but now, they could also be defined as microfiction, hint fiction, and nanofiction (Shapard 49). Today, journals have different definitions for short forms, specifying that such stories have to be 1,500 words or fewer to qualify while other established journals such as *SmokeLong Quarterly* bring this limit to 1,000

words. *Vestal Review* limits these stories to 500 words, *Dogzplot* to 200 words, and *Monkeybicycle* to a single sentence. Additionally, the popularity of such short works has crossed the boundaries of genre--extending into creative non-fiction with the establishment of such journals like *Brevity*. As more journals join the ranks of publishing these short forms, prestigious competitions such as the *Wigleaf* Top 50, a yearly collection of the best stories under 1,000 words published online, are becoming more common and are greatly revered among writers in the short forms community.

While some attribute the popularity of short forms to the shorter attention spans of today's readers, William Nelles, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, argues that short forms are not merely a popular miniaturized form of the traditional narrative, but rather an altogether different *type* of short story with different goals and intentions. Nelles goes on to describe how the six key narrative elements in short forms are distinctive in his article, "Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short?" and analyzes the intentions behind such choices. He argues that the most important of these elements are action, character, and closure, because these are the elements that best frame the short form and differentiate it from other narrative categories.

He contends that rather than being small and self-contained, actions occurring in short forms are actually the opposite. Nelles describes the events in such stories as "large, with major changes and reversals as the rule" (90), because when there are only so many words in a story, the words carry more power than they would otherwise, allowing each motion and gesture to "pop...out" (91) to readers in a way only possible in a narrative frame where focus is as intensified as it is in a short form. In such short forms, the central characteristics of short stories, traditionally being "impressionistic dramas of sensation and inner experience, of moral choice

and psychological emergence or growth" (Nelles 92), are concentrated, so much so that Nelles declares that the actions themselves matter more than the thoughts and emotions of the characters that perform them.

The space within short forms cannot afford to fully develop characters as they would be in longer works, but rather than these character depictions being stunted or restrained, characterization is actually upheld, but in a much more delicate fashion. Many times, characters in short forms are "anonymous...[and] of unspecified age" (Nelles 92), sometimes lacking not only names, but also "individualized identities or personalities" (Nelles 92), and while these characters may seem flat on the surface, they are not. Instead of being characterized by their histories, thoughts, and emotions, they exist on the page as "points of a triangle" (Nelles 92), known and understood by where they stand and how they function in relation to the other characters. With such starkness, these characters act more like representations. However, the intentions behind such simplicity is not to flatten the characters and rob them of life, but rather, to enable readers to identify better with these characters.[2] Rather than alienating readers with specific details that would separate the characters' narratives from their readers' own lives, the authors of short forms purposely make their characters easily identifiable.

The choices behind the use of setting in short forms follow similar rules in that these places are correspondingly stark. The reasoning for such is so that these small narratives may offer the "familiar and representative...[and suggest] a tight psychic space rather than specif[y] the physical space" (Nelles 93). This psychic space is essential for short forms, because with the intense attention short forms demand of their readers, words cannot be wasted on background

[2] In Felicia Cruz's article, "On The 'Simplicity' of Sandra Cisneros's House on Mango Street," that I address later in this introduction, Cruz describes how authors who use direct and uncomplicated language like Cisneros enable their word choices to act as speech. In doing so, their characters become more easily identifiable, because they become voices not only for themselves, but also for the readers of these narratives and the universal issues they face (Cruz 915).

and location, but rather can only be used on what is most important in the here and now, and that is what is happening on the page--the actions themselves. Readers can fill in the blanks. In fact, authors depend on them to do this, because in doing so, readers put their own thoughts and emotions into the story and thus make the reading a more personal and intimate experience.

Finally, while time is explored only through small, fleeting moments in short forms, Nelles makes an intriguing observation that time does not stop at the end of these small narratives, but rather continues. Nelles calls these phenomena "time loops" (98) or narrative circles in which time reverts back on itself in a sideways glance of reflection. The authors themselves of short forms, however, tend to call these "spirals" as Jayne Anne Phillips, a poet who writes one-page fictions, does when referring to her work. She maintains that in fashioning her work after a spiral construction, "the words circle out from a dense, packed core, and the spiral moves the words, past the boundary of the page...fast, precise, over. And not over" (as qtd. in Shapard 49). As a result, the narratives of these short forms continue to live, their characters continuing to grow and learn all while casting a glance back, signifying that they are not grown yet and have not yet learned all the lessons of their pasts. As such, these stories are incomplete and reflect the incomplete journeys of their characters to selfhood--the narratives only being small snippets of the lives on the page that will not be complete until the spirals stop and the characters have moved on.

However, there are small growths that occur in these spiral-like narratives and while in a short form, this spiral may only make one such revolution, these spirals tend to continue in novels utilizing the short form and thus allow for greater characterization and plot development. Authors in multiple genres have used the short form to frame their longer works, Sandra Cisneros and Judith Ortiz Cofer perhaps being the most popular for using this style in books such

as *The House on Mango Street* and *The Latin Deli*--books detailing the coming-of-age experience in vignettes, short stories, and prose poetry, often together in the same novel. Cisneros chooses to follow a more traditional novel structure in *Carmelo* while adhering to the short form in shaping her chapters and other authors have followed suit, some even breaking up longer chapters into short isolated sections as Margaret Atwood does in *Cat's Eye*, Jeanette Winterson does in *Oranges Are The Only Fruit*, Edwidge Danticat does in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and Miriam Toews does in *A Complicated Kindness*. This strategy is also prevalent in memoirs including *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen and *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls.

Yet the short forms in these novels and memoirs are more than just short chapters, but they are intentionally so to represent the lack of maturity of their characters in that these characters have not yet come of age in the sense of taking control of their lives. The protagonists of these works are all young girls and in many cases, are also abused and broken, and in narrating their lives in a fashion replete with pauses between or within these chapters, the authors of these works reflect such brokenness in the form. The short form allows these authors to portray these girls as incomplete and imperfect, and in doing so, allows them to become more authentic characters, their journeys toward selfhood more realistic, because often such journeys are not fluid, but are rather halting and uncertain.

While these girls do grow and mature, they do so over a series of defining moments in the course of spirals as mentioned earlier. Whether these be situations of abuse, poverty, illness, or another circumstance that rotates in and out of these characters' lives, these girls can choose to address these situations differently each time, having learned from the previous cycle and the cycle before that and thus prove their growth. Such a loop is also important not only in showing

leaps in these characters' maturity, but also in guiding readers back to the story at hand and to the issues at the center of these narratives. In being a sort of reflection, the spiral narrative strategy is also indicative of how the frame of short forms can act as a mirror of the readers' own experiences and cause them to also reflect as these tiny narratives bring such issues closer to home. Often, too, these mirrors are broken, the short form chapters acting only as shards--pieces of the complete story--but in being nameless, placeless, blank only until someone looks in--a reader--these tiny narratives reveal stories that are universal.

In my own novel rooted in the short form, *A House Made of Stars*, I aim to share similar discoveries and reflections in conveying a female protagonist who is struggling to come of age in a restrictive environment. While she is being raised by her mother to be a meek and submissive woman to the point of accepting her father's physical abuse, her and her sister's submission is two-fold, because although they are both deaf to varying degrees, they are forbidden by their father to sign and not only must submit to him in body, but in words as well. Additionally, when the girls ask questions in how to express themselves, they are punished severely. For example, after seeing their cousin stick out her tongue in a moment of teasing, they laugh and do it, too, only to have their father hold them down on the floor, pull out their tongues, and hit their jaws repeatedly, so that they bite their tongues through. As a result, they become blocked in speech, expression, and thought, and to reflect such obstruction and the eventual overcoming of such hindrances, but in a halting and tentative fashion, I chose to frame my novel in the short form.

In doing so, I aim for these chapters to not only reflect the difficult process of growing up for these girls, but also to convey such growth in a way that these girls would describe it--in an honest, direct way as children so often tell their stories. Such a strategy is not necessarily for simplicity's sake as their circumstances are anything but simple, but rather, I endeavor to frame

these moments in their lives by what is *not* said as much as what is, and thus rely more on the sparseness of short forms for this effect. Sandra Cisneros and Judith Ortiz Cofer also utilize this strategy in their novels rooted in the short form and rightly so, because their characters, in being underdeveloped in their use of language, convey also their youth and inexperience. The language remains uncomplicated throughout many of their works and even at the end of books such as *The House on Mango Street*, *The Latin Deli*, and *The Meaning of Consuelo*, there are still questions that remain unanswered, an indication that these girls still have growing to do and that their journeys toward selfhood are far from over.

This narrative approach is essential in portraying the central characters in *A House Made of Stars*, because not only are these girls still in the early stages of the coming-of-age process, but they are very much plain as characters and settings in short forms so often are--the girls blank in body and thought, because they are forbidden to express themselves or have any sense of individuality that is not condoned by their father. They follow Nelles's metaphor of characters in flash forms being points on a triangle, except in this case, these girls are representative of points in a constellation--specifically Cepheus, a constellation named after a king, but in actuality, is shaped like a crooked house that is tilted over on its side. The characters are only known by who they are in relation to one another, as a part to a whole, but never as an individual, and even then, their family, their house of stars, cannot stay upright, but rather only falls over further--some months even appearing almost upside down in the sky.

Additionally, just as constellations go through cycles of when and where they appear in the sky during the year, so do the events that occur in the family as depicted in *A House Made of Stars* in that they go through cycles of joy and pain. While the cycles are, in a sense, predictable, the events occurring in such revolutions steadily increase in intensity while the main protagonist

also increases the intensity in how she responds to such events. For example, during the first instance in which she and her sister stand to be punished, because their father cannot find his missing wallet, she is passive and is willing to accept his punishment, because she knows she is helpless to defend herself. In the second instance, a time in which she and her sister are both punished for copying their cousin in sticking out their tongues, they are punished again, but the protagonist realizes that it is not only her own comfort and safety at risk during her father's rages, but also her sister's, and she feels shame in not protecting her sister or at least offering herself to be punished first. Finally, in one of the final scenes, her father once again flies into a fury after being confronted by his wife's mother about his financial situation and the protagonist sees that so many more people are in danger--her mother, her grandmother, her sister, and her newborn brother--so she decides to distract her father by pushing over his television, an act that causes her father to beat her into unconsciousness.

After the end of the last cycle in *A House Made of Stars*, the protagonist makes a choice to cause a disruption, but she would have only been able to do so had she seen these cycles repeat as they had done earlier in the novel, because then, she knows the outcome, and what will come again if she does not act. Additionally, the protagonist matures a bit with each cycle, or spiral, because she begins to see her family in a different light, having reached another place emotionally and psychologically as a girl who is beginning to think and act independently.

The protagonist portrays her newfound sense of individuality on the final page when she sees the Cepheus constellation in the sky as she rides in the backseat of her family’s car. Still wounded and hurting from her father's last punishment, she watches the constellation until it disappears, then draws her own constellation on the car window, a new house in the sky, except one that is upright and no longer tipped over on its side. In doing so, she makes a choice to create

something for herself, and while she is yet young and cannot physically leave her home, she can aspire to do so and mentally separate herself as an individual whereas before, she could not. Thus, her narrative, as so many coming-of-age stories do, "end[s] and continue[s]" (Cruz 934) as she makes movement toward selfhood, but has not yet matured to the extent she needs to truly come into her own as an individual.

As such, *A House Made of Stars* is an incomplete coming-of-age story as so many narratives framed in the short form are, but yet the protagonist has come of age in a small sense, having completed several spirals in her life that has left her still a young girl, but one who is wiser than she was before. While she has made a choice to leave the crooked house of stars and make a righted one of her own, she cannot do so for years yet, and this is depicted in the way she is riding in her family's car, a long journey still ahead of them as she still has growing to do and more to discover about herself and her family. Her story is not over.

As a result, her story is one that fits framed in the short form, because her story is one that is stumbling and unsure, yet is one that stands to gain greater assurance and confidence as she continues to grow. Her voice is also not just her own, but one that speaks for others. The issues at stake in the novel are ones that cannot be ignored and with concerns like poverty and abuse striped down to their very essence, the short form and straightforward language allows these issues to be so close to the faces of readers that it creates such a claustrophobic sense that readers can empathize with the protagonist of *A House Made of Stars* and feel her increasing need to escape and grow as her own person.

Although the narrative form I use in *A House Made of Stars* still has a long way to go before being fully accepted and marketable in mainstream literature, it has proven to be promising in its narrative possibilities. As momentum builds behind this movement and more

writers become familiar with this narrative style, short forms will continue to prove themselves as more than just a very short story, but rather as a narrative tool that is much more complicated and whose form reflects this complexity. The short form has already proven its ability to adapt with time and to reinvent itself as a serious form of storytelling and as literature continues to change and adapt, will only do so to a greater degree. An intimate and immediate form of the narrative, the short form has proven its use and will continue to cement its place in literature as stories that, while brief and fleeting, linger long after they are over.

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One

When we go up the mountain where Daddy lived as a boy, he drives, one hand on the wheel. The car leans into each bend, and Momma grips the handle on the door and holds her breath when we go around the trucks ahead. Snow falls outside and the windshield begins to fog. The defroster is broken, so he sticks his head outside, and snow comes in, melts on his hair, the seat, and us behind him. My sister's asleep. It's after midnight.

When we reach the street, the houses are dark, except for one—the grey one with the white trim, chain link fence, and a black oak tree. The light in the kitchen is on and when Momma gets out and unlocks the fence, Daddy pulls into the driveway while his sister comes out of the house. She's in her pajamas, an orange blanket around her shoulders, and I see the curtains move upstairs, hands against the window where my cousin looks out.

Daddy turns off the car and sits, watches her and Momma hold hands and talk quietly in the cold. Momma points to the car, to us, and Daddy's sister nods, motions us all to the house, to the light inside.

When they open the car door, I pretend I'm just waking up, and Momma picks up my sister, and I follow them up the driveway, ice slick under my feet, my breaths like clouds. A fire burns in the wood stove, and Daddy's sister puts sheets on the floor and stuffs pillows in cases that smell of lavender—the same laundry soap Momma gets when we go to the Laundromat, watch our clothes tumble dry in big machines.

Everyone whispers now, and Daddy's sister looks to the top of the stairs. "I think she's asleep," she says, and I think of my cousin upstairs at the window, her hands on the glass. Momma lays her things on the floor where she and Daddy will sleep, then wakes my sister and takes us up the stairs.

My cousin's bed creaks as we reach her room. The nightlight is on and I see her form lying down, blankets hastily cast over her, and then I see why—the floor vent by the foot of her bed pulled out, lying on its side where her face had been moments before. She had shown me how she did this last time we were here when Daddy's momma died, a butter knife looped underneath the side and pulled up until the vent came free. While our mothers sat and cried downstairs, we watched them eat bread and lasagna, sometimes talking, sometimes saying nothing.

When Momma kisses us then goes back down the stairs, we wait until her shadow is gone and crowd near the vent, skin, hair touching as we share the small space. Their voices are low and it's hard to hear and my cousin signs what they say, so that my sister who is deaf can understand. Daddy's momma was deaf, too, and that's why my cousin knows sign, to talk to her when Daddy's momma lived with them before she died.

Momma's talking now. "I'm sorry," she says. "We didn't know it was going be like this."

Daddy's sister is shushing her, and we can see them sitting on the couch. Daddy's already asleep.

Momma mentions the money, how it's gone, that they don't know what to do, and I think of earlier in the day when we were packing our things. The movers had come to take our rented furniture, the red bunk bed, dressers, and the couch in the den. We had sold everything else—the chairs, the big table that my sister and I would throw a sheet over, play underneath like we were in a cave. When everything was gone, my sister and I played with the boxes that Momma didn't use, the ones we got from grocery stores, and made a covered maze in the den that smelled of oranges, limes—everything the boxes used to hold before.

At the end of the day, the landlord came, and Momma tells Daddy's sister about how he had walked through the house, pointed to dents in walls and the dirty ceiling fan as my sister and I waited in the den, now empty. The landlord stopped, knelt in the hallway where the carpet was ripped, where Momma had tried stapling it back down.

Momma's whispers gets louder, a move my cousin imitates with her hands, her signs more forceful, fingers tight around each word as Momma says that she tried to explain, tried to say that everything was like that before, but the landlord had shaken his head, left and Momma sat next to us in the den and cried.

I wait for Momma to tell the part that happened after, when Daddy came home and Momma told him that we didn't get the money and he had gone through the house, made more dents in the walls and cracked the window, but my cousin's hands are still, the house quiet as we listen through the vent in the floor. Momma's crying, and Daddy's sister says that it'll be okay, we can stay as long as we need.

They go to bed, the light's turned off, and we put the vent back where it was before. My sister and I lay down, still in our clothes, and my cousin gives us a blanket from the closet to share. It's a green one with pink squares, torn along the side and as everyone falls asleep, I stare at the stars on the ceiling, stickers that shine in the dark. My cousin had put them up last year, showed me when we stood on her bed as her fingers traced over the outlines, then she had turned out the lights, so that I could see them glow.

Two

When I wake, snow speckles the windows, and I get up to look outside. The snowplow hasn't come by yet, and the streets are smooth. Daddy's shoveling the driveway, making a path from the street to the cars and the front door. He doesn't wear a jacket or gloves and from the distance, I can see his hands growing pink in the cold, matching the color of the burn scar that goes from the top of his hand up his arm to his shoulder, his neck, and the side of his left ear. Momma says he likes the cold, that's why he runs the air in the wintertime, sleeps with no blankets on.

I hear Daddy's sister downstairs. She's telling Momma about what's new since the last time we visited her, the finished hotel by the stoplight, the walkway by the lake as she sets dishes out on the table. I peek down the stairs and my sister's pouring cereal in blue plastic bowls, standing on her chair, leaning over the table to pour milk from a yellow jug.

The door to the bathroom creaks and my cousin peeks out, motions me in. She stands in front of the mirror, and I sit on the side of the bathtub, watch her curl her hair, like I used to watch Momma at home, the mornings before church spent in the bathroom in front of the mirror. Momma calls these moments "special time," a phrase her mother used when Momma was a girl and Grandma would wash Momma's face, braid her hair, lick her palms, smear them over Momma's hair to keep the strays down, things Momma now does to us, too.

My cousin does her hair differently than Momma does, curls under in the back, pins, sprays down the sides, her fingers delicate, gentle, like the way she signs. She puts aloe vera on her face, her arms, green gel that makes her skin gleam and takes my hand, hers still sticky, and puts me in front of the mirror.

The sink is cluttered, brushes round and flat, combs on each side of the faucet. Hair spray, the green bottle of aloe vera on a shelf above. She gives me her brush, a round one full of her hair, and I look in the mirror, pull it through mine, hold the top of my head when I reach tangles, like I had seen her do. She watches me now, turns the sink faucet on, cups water in her hands, then drips it over my head.

She takes the brush, does the back, twists my hair, pulls, and ties it with a pink band. Her nails are pink, too, and I put my hand up to hers, to see the design, pink on one side, white on the other, a line in between.

"How'd you do that?"

She gets the pencil from the shelf and shows it to me.

The lead is marked with nail polish, white and pink, purple and black from times before.

"Want me to do yours?"

I nod, hold my hand out, and she sits on the floor, gets the nail polish out. She draws the lines on my nails, presses down hard, lead marking where paint will go. Daddy's sister calls from downstairs, and my cousin yells back, eyes not moving from her work.

We're leaving soon for church, the one Daddy's sister goes to past the frozen lake, the ski slopes on the other side of the mountain, and I remember the cassette tapes of the sermons Daddy's sister sent Momma in the mail. Momma listened to them when she did the dishes in the mornings, sometimes, right after we went to our own church, and while my sister and I played under the dining table, pretended we were wolves hiding in a den, the pastor's voice talked in the background, pausing, every word drawn out.

My cousin paints my nails now, her fingers sure as she curves her wrist, stops, then wipes when the paint reaches skin. The polish is cold, but her hands are warm. Daddy's sister calls again.

"Coming," she screams back, doesn't move, closes one bottle of nail polish, opens another.

She paints with pink now, covers some of the white, the pencil lead underneath. Daddy's sister calls again, and my cousin yells back, loud and long, like the pastor did on Momma's tapes. *Glory*. Coming. *Praise*. Coming. *Amen*.

Three

The church is bigger than I remember, and Daddy's sister points out the new covered walkway and new rooms built at the back of the sanctuary. The new rooms are where the little kids go, and Momma takes me and my sister down the new hallway lined with white walls, scribbled pictures of a shepherd and his sheep by each doorway, some pages with names printed beneath, some without any names at all.

My cousin comes with us and goes in the room where the junior high kids are, watches as we walk farther down the hall to where the younger kids play. I am ten, but my sister is six. and Momma takes us to the room where there is a big sign in blue over the door saying, "5-6." Momma always made us go together at our church back home and when we reach the door, the teacher is a lady who wears glasses and a yellow dress. She smiles at Momma who speaks to her quietly, nods at my sister and me. I don't hear what she says, but I know, because she says the same thing to everyone, that my sister is deaf, that she needs me to stay to tell the teacher what she says, what the teacher says back.

At our church back home, we would sit in a circle as the teacher read stories, sung songs. When the kids would play Simon Says, I watched, and when my sister didn't know what to do, I would sign the directions, my words small, so the teacher wouldn't see. We can't sign to my sister—Daddy doesn't allow it.

Momma used to sign to my sister and me, years ago. We went to the doctor when my sister was three. When Daddy came home, Momma laid the hearing tests out, marked with Xs and Os, lines connecting them low across the bottom of the page. I was forty percent deaf in the left ear, sixty in the right. My sister, completely deaf, both ears. We watched a movie in the den while Momma told Daddy in the kitchen.

"They can still be normal," she said, knowing my sister couldn't hear, forgetting I could. She put a hand to his head, but he batted it away, went down the hall and shut the door.

I watch Momma talk to the teacher now as I take my sister to a long wooden table where the other kids sit on yellow plastic chairs coloring pictures of Jesus on a mountain in front of a crowd, in his hands, fish and bread that he raises to God. Momma tells the teacher why I am here, puts her right hand to her ear, hand formed in a D, but catches herself before her hand reaches her mouth. She does this sometimes, signs without meaning to when talking to other people.

I open a box of markers, pick out the red and blue ones, ones my sister likes best and pass them to her, and watch as Momma waves to us then leaves. The classroom my sister and I used to go to—the place we learned to sign—was like this room. A bulletin board on the wall, stars by everyone's name. Black bins of blocks by the doors. A mural on the wall by the windows. The one in the classroom we went to was of smiling children standing in a line, hands out in front of them, forefingers interlocked, a sign we learned to mean "friend." Here, the mural is of Jesus who sits on a rock, smiles down at children who kneel at his feet.

We had gone to the class for nine months until the one time Daddy came with us. Momma pointed out our paintings on the walls, the pictures of us all together with our friends, their wheelchairs, braces on their legs, but when Daddy saw us signing to the teacher, to him, showing off the word we knew for "Daddy," he left, waited for us in the car, then when Momma drove us home, ran his hands through his hair the way he does when they talk about bills.

"I thought you were teaching them to speak," he said, and Momma said, "I was."

Daddy knew sign. I knew, because his momma would sign things to him and his sister before she died, words slow, muffled in her hands that were hesitant to open and close, but I had never seen words from his hands.

My sister's signs are quick and almost always half-formed when she signs to me, often using only one hand, not looking to see if anyone is watching first like I do. She asks for more of the markers from the box. Red, she signs, a finger touching her lips, then coming away.

I stare at the lines she's made, the red on the page, the blue she's colored over. Jesus, the crowd, the fish and bread are muddled now, and I touch the page to see. The page feels wet under my hand, and when I lift it, there is a red stain on my fingers where the ink bled through. My sister's fingers are discolored, too, and as she continues to color, I touch the stain with my other hand and expect the ink to smear, but it stays, the ink already dry in the grooves of my skin.

Four

After church, we move into the room above the garage, the one where Daddy's momma lived before she died. The walls are different now, her framed prayers, crucifixes gone, but the room still smells of pine, her--a musky scent of sweat, hairspray, and smoke. I had only been in this room once when I sat on the floor as Daddy's momma spilled jelly beans in a bowl, picked out the pink ones she liked best, gave them to my sister and me. She and Momma sat at the table in the kitchen, talked while my sister and I played with the wicker basket at the foot of her bed, the old telephones and plastic pearls inside.

The last time I saw her was when Momma and Daddy's sister were with her a few days before she died. It was in this room--I was just outside on the stairs, looking through the door cracked open. I wasn't supposed to be there. She was in a chair and they were talking to her, brushing her hair, feeding her tapioca pudding from a spoon. Her eyes didn't look at them, only past--past the oxygen tank at her bare feet, the door almost closed, past me. That night, Momma knelt next to my sister, me on the floor inside Daddy's sister's house where we slept, told us we wouldn't be here long.

Daddy came at night on these days, but often stayed outside, standing for hours on the icy driveway, hands in his pockets, breathing into the cold. Sometimes, Momma or Daddy's sister would come down from the room, ask him if he wanted to see her, but he never turned, never said anything at all.

Daddy doesn't come with us as we move our clothes and Momma's dishes to the room above the garage. He takes our car to the construction site by the church to look for a job and in the hours after, we unpack and I look for things, pieces of his momma that may have been left behind, but the room is swept clean. The windowsills are dusted, sink and bathtub scrubbed, nail

holes in the walls filled in with white toothpaste, a trick Momma taught us before we moved here. Her rocking chair, television that clicked with each turn of the channel, bowls of jelly beans are gone.

My sister and I play hide and seek, but there aren't many places to hide, in the cabinets, behind the door, in the closet. The room is small. I count nine big steps wide across the room, fourteen steps long. The sink and refrigerator are on one wall, bed on the other, a card table with two chairs in the middle of the room, and a bathroom at the end with a door that's too short, so we can see the feet of whomever's inside. Momma makes the bed, says she will share it with Daddy and gives my sister and me blankets to put on the floor. We set up our pillows under the window that looks out to Daddy's sister's house, and I see my cousin's room where we were the night before.

The light is off, but the curtains are open and I see the Crystal Lewis and Boyz II Men posters on her wall, purple blankets on her bed and remember the nights I stood at that window, when we all did—my sister, my cousin, and me—when Daddy's mother was here. No vent in the floor to hear or see our parents below, we watched the room above the garage, at the window for light, a figure passing by, but more often than not, there was nothing.

Five

When Daddy comes home, it's late and everyone's already in bed, but he's loud when he opens the door and slams it closed. His boots trail snow behind him as he throws his keys, his cap, his wallet on the counter and walks to the closet by the bed, flips the light on. The light floods the room, and I look to where my sister is sleeping next to me by the wall. She doesn't stir, and I move further beneath the blanket, so that he can't see me, but I can see him, a dark shadow that paces the room.

Momma doesn't ask Daddy if there were any jobs. She knows as do I. His shadow runs his hand through his hair, stops a moment as he holds his breath, then moves in a blur as he throws the table, the chairs over, and they clatter across the floor. I feel my sister wake up beside me and put a hand on her side. She stills, knows to be silent.

"There's nothing," says Daddy and Momma doesn't say anything, but sits on the bed, watches him, waits for him to quiet. Her shadow is still, but Daddy continues to pace, stop, pace again until he kicks one of the chairs out of his way. It skitters across the room.

"I need to clear my head," he says, and he goes to the counter again, grabs his wallet, keys, cap, and puts it on as he opens the door. It's snowing, and I peek my head out to see the little flakes float in, land on him, the floor, and our blankets where my sister and I are laying on the floor.

"Get in the car," he says over his shoulder, and his steps are heavy going down the stairs outside, the door left open. The snow comes down harder now, blows farther in and after a moment, Momma gets up from the bed, and closes the door. She's in her pajamas, a painting t-shirt flecked with white paint and green flannel bottoms that cover her ankles and half her feet,

her hair in a ponytail. Her mouth is slightly open, her lips thin the way they get when Momma breathes through her mouth and tries not to cry.

She motions for us to get up, and we do, and Momma goes to the closet, gets out our coats, puts them on over our pajamas. She pulls on jeans, steps into her shoes, laces still tied, and ushers us out the door. We leave the table and chairs overturned inside.

The air is cold, and we hold the handrails going down the stairs. The moon is big tonight, and I stare at it over the black oak tree in the front yard as Momma takes us to the car where Daddy's waiting, the engine already on, exhaust billowing from behind the car.

We go to Starlight, the drive-in movie theater where Momma puts down our seats in the back and tells us to sleep. "Daddy just needs to clear his mind," she says.

We've done this before, gotten up in the middle of the night to go to the movies when Daddy was laid off, but in those times, Daddy would buy a tub of popcorn for him, Junior Mints for Momma, and snack packs for us, small trays of popcorn dripping with butter, a big soda, any candy that we wanted. We don't have money for those things now.

My sister's asleep before the previews start, and Daddy talks through the movie, quietly, then louder when he hits the steering wheel, says all the same things again.

I don't sleep, but listen to him and watch the reflections of the movie in the window, the big moon in the sky. His voice is hard, and I hear the consonants through his teeth, sounds I usually have a difficult time hearing, but I always hear them with Daddy, because of the way he forces the air from his mouth, so that the words almost whistle from his lips. His voice is one that I continue to hear when the movie is over, and we start the drive back as I weave in and out of sleep, his voice saying, "I need to get out of here," and Momma's saying, "Where? There's nowhere for us to go."

Six

For weeks, Daddy drives down the mountain to look for a job and when he's gone, I stand at the window facing Daddy's sister's house and watch my cousin wait for the school bus, her hair pulled back the way she taught me to do, dressed in a white coat, pink mittens, and white snow boots. The bus comes, pulls over to where she stands and she climbs on and through the bus windows, I see the other kids, some older than her, some younger, all talking, heads turning, mouths moving as the bus drives away.

I had asked my cousin what real school was like, and she didn't have a lot to say, except for names of teachers, her friends, the boy she sat next to in class. Momma teaches us at home and as I watch the bus grow smaller as it goes farther down the street, picks the neighbor kids up, Momma and my sister sit together at the card table and review lessons they learned the day before.

Today, Momma holds a cotton ball in her palm, hand straightened out and leans down so her mouth is next to it, says, "who," long and drawn out and the ball falls to the table. My sister's speech lessons always come first, something Momma started after we stopped going to the class where we signed. Momma got her lessons from the library and for hours, she would sit at a table next to the stacks, hand on her head as she read from big books, and my sister and I would wander the children's aisles, sit on the floor, look at books about trees with big roots that go underground, animals that are wild and hunt for their food, old cars that travel on dirt roads, pass storefronts and saloons.

Momma used to bring her books home, pages dog-eared, and show my sister sections where faces take up half the page, mouths formed in an "o," widened in an "a," nearly closed in a "u." She doesn't have these books now—we returned them before we came here—and I miss the

books, the ones that Momma would read to us every night after we prayed, ones about a girl and her big red dog, a boy who loses his plush rabbit when he becomes ill, and a tree who offers his branches to a boy from when he is a baby to when he is old.

Momma's voice is the same in her lessons as when she tells stories, low and soft, mouth careful over the words. She speaks slowly with my sister this morning, picks up the cotton ball again, says "who," as she did before, and the ball rolls off onto the table. She flattens my sister's hand, puts the cotton ball in her palm. She leans down as Momma did, purses her lips together, blows without a sound, and the ball falls.

Momma picks it up again, takes my sister's hand. "Like this," she says as she puts my sister's hand around her throat, holds her palm with the cotton ball in front of her mouth, hums, says "who" again. My sister smiles, tries to pull her hand away, but Momma keeps it there, says the word one more time.

Momma puts my sister's hand on her own throat now, holds her palm in front of my sister's mouth, and she starts to say the word, her voice loud, strained as she forces a hum she can feel. My sister keeps her hand on her throat as they move onto other words, and I make the same words in front of the window, quietly, but so that my breath fogs the glass in front of me.

When the fog clears, I see the mountains beyond the forest in front of Daddy's sister's house, the peaks jagged and bright in the sun. I don't know the name of the mountain, only that our home where we used to live is beyond it, down the winding roads to the red valley where the ground is dry and cracked, where boulders big as houses stand in the sun. Our house was in the city beyond the valley, past the airfield, and stood at the end of a street, painted blue, a window in the front, and on the side, a mulberry tree where Momma planted flowers every spring.

I know Momma misses her flowers. They're in all the stories she tells us before bed, ones she makes up now, because our books from the library are gone. She tells us about girls and boys who walk through magical gardens, ones where the flowers are alive, who guide them on their way. Our favorite is the story of a girl who finds a magic shed in her backyard that takes her to a land far from her own, where the flowers stay open at night, the moon is always out, and the clouds never cover the stars.

Seven

One day, we come with Daddy down the mountain, but before we go, Momma wakes us up early while Daddy's still asleep, pulls out white poster boards, markers from the closet, and we draw babies. Heads with black eyes, bodies curled, hands in mouths, a blue cord running from their bellies to somewhere off the page. Momma does the writing, block letters in red, colors them in with diagonal stripes, pen squeaking with each stroke.

We do this on the floor, so we have more room, and Momma has her pink Bible open in front her for the verses she writes down, though she knows them from memory. We memorize her favorites as part of school, practice them before bed, whispering the verses of Philippians, Galatians, and John, as Momma listens, kisses us good night.

We don't say the verses now as we write them, but Momma is singing one of her worship songs, quietly, so that she doesn't wake Daddy. She sings the song slower than we do at church, but I love her voice. It's smooth and glides over the notes the way the singers sing on her worship tapes. The song she's singing now is one that she's played on the stereo many times.

I don't sing with her. I don't want to spoil the moment where Daddy's asleep, and we're alone with Momma. The air outside is quiet, the neighbor dogs still, snow pristine as Momma sings of what the Holy Spirit is like, of water that is alive.

She blows the ink dry and holds the boards up to see. Daddy stirs and her singing quiets, gradually fading to a whisper, her mouth moving less and less, and becoming silent as Daddy gets up.

He takes a shower, gets dressed for another day looking for jobs, and we all pack the car with our posters, drive down the mountain where the snow is gone, the ground is dry, and sun is warm. Daddy drops us off with Momma's friends from church, a group standing with posters of

their own. Behind them is a brick building with a green sign, the outline of a woman just above. Underneath her, it says hope.

We pray together, hold our signs up with the verses, the babies we drew, and cars drive by, some honking, some yelling, others holding their hands out from their windows, a finger upraised. The day grows hot and my arms get tired and my sister and I take turns holding the same sign. I look to the drivers' faces as they drive by and many don't look back, but some do, and I start to sing like Momma does, hoping they'll hear.

The song is from one of the movies Momma got at a sale at the library, one where they sell their movies for ten cents each. We watch it when Momma reviews the ten commandments and my favorite is the song for number six. I sing loud and my sister joins in on the parts she knows, hums through the rest.

All God's children are beautiful like you,

All God's children deserve a good life, too.

I look to the building behind me where a truck pulls out of the parking lot, and Momma and her friends point their signs toward them. I continue to sing, wonder if the girl inside killed her baby the way Momma said people do when they come here.

I close my eyes, lift my head to the sun, sing loud, so that she can hear.

All God's children are beautiful like you.

I picture the way Little Miriam sings the song in the movie as crayoned drawings of babies, children of all colors fill, then fade from the screen. Black drawings of guns and bombs replace them when Little Miriam sings of not killing, of respecting life and following God, a rainbow the characters in the movie call "the love light," and I imagine the darkness in the building behind us.

My sister loves the love light song, and we sing it together now as the girl's truck fades from view. My sister holds a hand to her throat as Momma had taught her to do to make sure she feels her voice and we sing together, our voices in different pitches, but saying the same words.

We sing the same refrain until we see Daddy's car comes back, and Momma rolls up our signs. Daddy pulls over, waits in the driver's seat, car idling, as we put the posters in the back, and Momma opens the side door. My sister is still singing and before we get in, Momma puts a hand on her shoulder, puts a finger over her mouth, and she stops mid-song.

Eight

When we get in the car, Daddy says he got an interview and starts to drive down a road that leads away from the mountains.

"We have to celebrate," he says, "as a family," and I can tell he's happy. He talks to us in the rearview mirror, pats Momma's leg, and makes big motions with his hands when he speaks, leans back in his seat when he laughs.

"This will be good for us," he says. "It'll help us unwind."

He pulls into a parking lot, and it's a restaurant I've not seen before. The windows have curtains, and there's a garden near the steps to go inside. Momma pauses before she opens the car door. "Are you sure?" she asks Daddy, quietly, so that we won't hear.

Daddy's response is loud. "We deserve it. Come on, it'll be a treat."

We do, and the inside is fancy with candles and tablecloths on each table, waiters dressed up, and the lights dim. Music plays over speakers I can't see, and Daddy strides to the podium where the host waits, tells him he wants a table for four, looks back at us with a smile, and gives Momma a wink.

We sit at a table by the window and when the menus come, I look for the prices as Momma had taught me to do, for the meals that are cheapest, but I don't see the numbers anywhere. Momma's breaths are shallow as she thumbs through her own menu, and I can see her casting nervous glances at Daddy, at the waiter coming to our table. Looking to my sister beside me, I poke her side, and when she looks, sign beneath the table, so that Daddy doesn't see.

"Share?" I ask, and she nods.

The waiter comes, a man whose hair is slicked back, and sets a basket of bread on the table and pours oil in a saucer. He asks for our orders, and Daddy takes our menus, says he wants a steak for everyone.

"The finest cut," he says, enunciating each word with his hand held up, fingers out except for the thumb and forefinger that touch. "And a cigar," he says. "The best."

The waiter leaves, and Momma leans in, speaks low, but I can't read what she says.

Daddy leans back in his chair, laughs. "Of course. Besides, we'll have lots of money once I get this job."

The steaks come, and the waiter leans down near Daddy, a box of cigars open for him to pick, and he chooses one in the middle, then waits as the waiter lights it. I had never seen Daddy smoke a cigar, and he looks funny with it in his mouth, especially when it keeps going out, and Daddy has to call the waiter over again. As Momma cuts up the steaks for us, Daddy looks to us again, asks how our day went, and we tell him about the signs we made, our prayers with Momma's friends, and the people we saw.

We eat, and I watch Daddy take in large mouthfuls of steak, bread, talking to Momma between bites. He continues to smoke, and my sister stares at Daddy, waits for him to stop talking, to take another bite before she looks to Momma.

"Momma, what's this?" she asks, and holds a fist up, middle finger raised, and Momma darts her hand to cover it, but Daddy sees.

We had seen it today when cars were passing by, and I was curious, too, but the faces of those who used it were angry, shouting at us as they drove past. I didn't think my sister had seen.

Daddy's face changes as his knife clatters to his plate. His leans forward, his eyes hard, and catches her fist, clenching it tight.

"Don't you ever do that," he says, the burn scar on his neck darkening the way it does when he gets angry, and I can barely hear him. "You hear me?"

His grip gets tighter, and my sister's eyes fill, her face getting red, but she holds it in.

Daddy releases her and holds an outstretched hand in front of her face.

"Do that again," he says, his voice still low, "and I will rip your finger off."

He makes a motion with his other hand to pull off his middle finger and for a long moment, everyone at the table is silent.

Straightening, Daddy throws his cigar down on his plate. "We're leaving."

He takes his wallet out, grabs all the money inside, counts it and puts it on the table. "Give me your wallet," he says to Momma, and she does. He cleans it out and sets the bills together. It's all the money we have.

We leave, food uneaten on the plates, Daddy's cigar still smoking, and the sky is dark when we go outside. Daddy drives back, fast, passes the cars ahead of him, and we don't say anything. When we reach the mountain, we hug each curve in the road, Momma holding onto the door handle, my sister and I leaning into one another, skin, clothes touching. Usually, she sleeps on car rides, but she is awake now, wringing her hands, one then the other, gripping tight, so that there are brief seconds of white across her fingers when she lets go. I look down to my own hands, think back to the way Daddy held his hand up, then jerked with the other in a motion to break, pull his finger off. I pull at my own fingers, gently then hard, wonder how much force Daddy would have to use to pull them off, if the bones would have to break before the skin came free, and how much everything would bleed when he was done.

Nine

After Daddy's interview, he stays home, sleeps during the day, and watches the news on the TV at night. Momma takes us to the park on these days and the playgrounds are empty, the kids still in school and my sister and I swing high on the swings, make marks where we jump off, land on the ground. We make obstacle courses through the playground, run across the moving bridge, hurl ourselves down the slide, swing across the monkey bars, and Momma times us on her watch, always tells us that we tied.

One day she doesn't time us on her watch, but sits alone on a picnic bench, her Bible open, hunched over the pages, a hand over her mouth, clenched in a fist. Her brows are furrowed, eyes full, and I know that Daddy didn't get the job.

We stay at the park for hours, until it's long past cold, and Momma's coat is dusty with snow, her hair speckled in white, her tennis shoes blending in with the white at her feet. Momma reads the Bible when she needs alone time, and we leave her be, play in the cold, a new game today, one in which we are in the wilderness, that we are lost, must forage for shelter, food. We call this game the end of the world.

We find fallen logs in the forest by the playground, long, smooth sticks covered in snow and drag them by the picnic benches, stack them big enough to hold Momma, my sister, and me. The houses don't have doors, roofs, but the walls are strong.

When we're done, my sister and I lay in the snow, look up at the sky, watch as our breaths leaves our mouths, drift up past the trees, and I pray the way Momma does when she's scared, repeat the same words, so that God can hear me.

Ten

On the weekend, Daddy still sits inside, watches the news stories play over and over again on the TV, and I ask Momma what we can do to cheer him up. We go to the store with Momma's emergency money, an envelope she keeps in her underwear drawer, and we get eggs, oil, a big baking sheet to take back home. We bake cookies in the kitchen, ginger snaps that we mix together in a bowl, mash together brown sugar, cinnamon, cloves, and make them into little balls. They cook in the oven, and my sister and I look through the glass door, watch the flattened balls rise, crack at the tops, then Momma takes them out, lets them cool while we smell them, whisper how many we will save for Daddy.

When they are ready, I get a plate, fill it full, and wait until the commercial comes on before going to Daddy, placing it by his chair. He's still watching the news and from the breaking story on the screen, I can tell which story comes next and the one after that. It's late now, and Momma and my sister are getting ready for bed, already lying down by the blankets and pillows by the wall. Momma's telling stories, and I stand by Daddy's chair, watch the television's light flicker over his eyes, his sharp nose, thin lips, the rippled skin behind his ear and down his neck.

I had asked him about it, years ago when he didn't take his shirt off when we went to the pool, and he was quiet, eyes ahead. I thought he didn't hear, then touched the skin that wasn't like mine, and he flinched, slapped me away. Momma only told me afterwards when we were taking a bath, washing the chlorine from our hair.

"His momma was sick when Daddy was a little boy," she said. "She didn't know."

I'm afraid to touch him now as I watch the TV's reflection on his skin.

"Daddy?"

He turns toward Momma, calls her the way he does when he's angry, and I step back. Momma comes, takes my shoulders in her hands, and I can feel her bent down over me, her hair tickling my shoulders as she leads me to bed.

I lay down next to my sister and watch Daddy as Momma prays with us, and when Momma kisses me good night, she follows my gaze, looks to Daddy, too.

"He just tired," she says, petting my arm and when she gets up, I fall asleep to the sounds of the newscasters on the television, of the men in suits telling of a robbery at the 7-11 store by the road leading down the mountain, of the guns the burglars used to get their money, and the sounds of sirens as they ran away.

Eleven

Daddy doesn't look for jobs anymore, and Momma keeps us outside when he sleeps during the day. One morning after church, we go with Daddy's sister to the hardware store, buy wood, nails, and wire. Daddy's sister carries a drawing with her of a tall room, levels marked off in inches, blurred after being erased, redrawn many times, and shows it to the people who work at the store, and they add hinges, point her to the wood cutting station at the end of the aisle. She wants to make a chicken coop.

They've had chickens before, my cousin tells me as we watch a man measure and saw the wood down to small beams. She tells me about the mornings they harvested the eggs, reaching in the coop when it's still dark, taking eggs that looked different from the white ones at the store, brown ones still warm from their nests. She gave the birds names, spoke to them as they woke, and I watch her hands as she describes how she used to lift them and move them to the side.

"The birds are coming next week," she says and she looks to my sister who watches us talk, watches my cousin's hands, too. "You can help me name them."

We bring the wood and wire from the car to the backyard and while Momma and Daddy's sister hammer it together, talk in between strokes, we all think of names for the birds. My cousin writes them all on a sheet of paper, and when Daddy's sister tells us we're in the way, we go to our cousin's room and think of more names while the hammering goes on outside.

My sister and I take turns with the sheet, narrow down the names we like, and my cousin opens her top drawer, gets out a candy cigarette, holds it between her fingers like I had seen Daddy's momma do, and my sister gasps, asks if it's real.

She smiles, shakes her head. "It's candy," she says.

I had seen my cousin suck on them before, blow once through them first, watch as sugar smoke billowed out the other side, as she smiles, offers one to me. I remember the cigar Daddy smoked in the restaurant, the way his large fingers fumbled with it, how it had gone out, different than the way my cousin holds it now, delicate in her fingers, lithe and beautiful. It smells sweet, like gum, as she sucks on it, watches us put the names of the birds away.

"You want to see something?" she asks, and we get on her bed, watch her open her closet and get something from inside.

She digs past her dance dresses, the blue sparkly one that I love to touch when she lets me see her clothes, and I watch as she picks up a shopping bag, puts whatever is inside behind her back, then faces us.

"Can you guess what it is?"

She signs with a single hand, and my sister signs guesses, gestures that get bigger and bigger each time my cousin shakes her head. My cousin looks to me. "Do you know?"

I don't, and she pauses, then draws it out in a single motion, and we both gasp.

A bra.

But unlike ones we've seen in the laundry, ones that Momma wears. It's a colored bra, a blue one with white lace along the top edges of the cups and the sides of the straps.

We reach out to touch it, mouths open in awe, and my cousin lets us crowd in to see.

Our voices get low as we ask her where she got it, when, and how it felt, and she answers back. Kmart, yesterday, wonderful.

We both ask then. "Can we see it on?"

She smiles, looks to the bra in her hands. "Sure."

Closing the door, she steps to the other side of the room, turns around, and takes off her shirt. She wears a white bra now, and while my sister and I stare at the floor, I sneak glances of her unhooking the clasp, taking it off, so that her back is bare and I can see the muscles, the bones underneath move as she puts the new one on.

She turns around, hands on her hips, and we look, but stay where we are, hands clasped in front of us, afraid to touch.

"It's beautiful," I say.

My sister nods next to me, shy now that my cousin has her shirt off and when Momma calls to us from downstairs, we all scramble around the room, my cousin jerking her shirt over her head, us getting out the bird names again, sitting on the floor, pretending we never saw anything.

My cousin opens her door and we all go down the stairs and for the rest of the day, my sister and I look at each other, smile, then look away, try not to stare at my cousin's shirt, the hints of blue underneath, the folds of lace against the fabric when she moved, try not to think of what was beneath our own shirts, the bare skin of girls.

Twelve

The chickens come and when they start to lay eggs, my cousin waits for us in the mornings at the bottom of the stairs, and we sneak out the front door, creep down in the dark to the chicken coop in the back. Only one of us can fit in the coop at a time, and my cousin talks to us when she's gathering the eggs, tells us what she's doing, so that we can do it next. Some of the chickens flutter their wings, and my sister pulls her hands to her chest, feet shuffling, as she fights to keep quiet, to not scare the birds.

My cousin motions my sister inside, and she shakes her head, and but my cousin beckons again, and takes my sister's hand, puts it under hers. She pulls her in, kneels down, and they are cramped together in the small space, but they don't seem to notice. Guiding my sister's hand, she moves it toward the birds still sleeping and at first, my sister pulls back, then pauses when my cousin puts up a hand, then brings it down flat. She's telling her to calm down.

Their fingers touch the bird, and it doesn't stir, except for the rise and fall of its feathers as it breathes, and I watch my sister's face widen into a smile as she looks to my cousin, begins to pet the bird, gently as if it would break if she moved too quickly. My cousin touches it, too, fingers reaching beneath it, pulls out an egg, and gives it to my sister who holds it to her chest for the rest of the harvest, then carries it upstairs for Momma.

During our lessons through the day, we think of the sleeping chickens we see in the mornings, Momma changing the math problems to adding and dividing groups of birds, eggs and as we work the problems out, we smell what we do each morning, the musk of grain, the stink of soiled straw, and the fallen feathers that collect in the corners, that smell warm, almost sweet when it rains.

Thirteen

My sister's birthday comes, and when my cousin gets home from school, we go to my Daddy's sister's house, run upstairs to my cousin's room where she's putting her backpack in the closet and kicking off her shoes. Momma and Daddy's sister start cooking in the kitchen, spaghetti and garlic bread, and as my cousin turns on her stereo, plays it loud, the smell of tomatoes, onions, and oregano drift upstairs.

Her room is small, but she spins and steps to the music, motions bigger than she had done them before. She had gotten the part of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, her school play, and I had watched her practice the songs at her window, many times with her eyes closed. She sees my sister watching and pauses mid-dance, takes her hand, and places it on the stereo, so that she can feel the rise and fall of the music.

My sister smiles as she closes her eyes and when she opens them, my cousins signs. "Like the music?" and my sister nods, hands unmoving from the notes that continue to vibrate from the speakers.

We watch my cousin practice, dance to songs about a rainbow, a yellow brick road, and home until Daddy's sister calls us downstairs and we eat, plates heaping with noodles, meat, and bread. The adults eat at the table and we in the den, cross-legged in a circle as we breathe in the steam of the spaghetti, eat it slowly to make it last. I am hungry, and I know my sister is, too, but we don't take seconds, because it's Daddy's sister's food. Momma only lets us go to visit my cousins after they've had dinner since we lived here and washes our clothes in our bathtub, hangs them dry over the shower rod instead of using the washer and dryer in the garage, because she doesn't want us to intrude.

Momma and Daddy are on the front porch with Daddy's sister when we bring our plates to the kitchen, and as my cousin and sister join them outside, I steal a piece of bread in my fist, eat it in the bathroom where no one will see.

When I go outside, Momma says we'll play a game. She has a piece of paper, on it, words like candles, balloons, and string. "It's called a scavenger hunt," she says and we each get a list, go around the neighborhood to check the items off, knowing we'll get a prize if we win.

Momma goes with us down the street, and my cousin goes alone. We check off things until dark, take in shoelaces, pencils, marbles, and brown paper bags. Sometimes, people give us similar things--instead of a birthday candle, big, fat candles that smell of pine--and we take them in, too.

When we come back, my cousin is already there, and when we put our collection on the porch, she sneaks her own things into my sister's pile, gives her the tea bags, ticket stubs from movies, and the unopened bars of soap we couldn't find. Momma counts all the things and says my sister is the winner, gives her a dollar, and I watch my cousin smile, but don't tell her what I saw.

Momma splits up the marbles, pencils, and balloons among us, and we blow the balloons up as Momma puts our collected birthday candles on a yellow cake Daddy's sister made. We sing Happy Birthday, but my cousin signs the words, and Daddy sees. I glimpse the muscles moving on the side of his head the way he does when he clenches his jaw. My sister blows out the candles and everyone cheers except for Daddy. His eyes are still on my cousin, his lips open as he breathes slowly through his mouth, and my cousin sees him watching, holds his stare, then raises her eyebrows, mouths a word. "What?"

A cold flash comes across my chest as I watch them stare at each other across the room, as Daddy's sister cuts the cake and Momma sets out the plates. My cousin knows we can't sign and usually Daddy isn't here when she does, but when she sees Daddy's jaw clench tighter, his teeth grinding, her smirk grows until Daddy stands, skids the chair against the wall behind him, and goes outside.

We eat, wash the dishes, and put them away without him and when Momma and Daddy's sister sit on the porch and talk outside, we play a game. In our room above the garage, there are only so many places to hide, but in Daddy's sister's house, there are so many more and as my sister counts, my cousin and I hide. We hide in the bath tub, under beds, behind doors, in the laundry hamper, and wait for each other to reach twenty, then come to find us. We almost never find my cousin, her only later revealing that she was in the dryer or outside where it was against the rules.

The only time they don't find me is when I go to the storage space under the stairs. I crawl past the boxes, heap the coats on top of me, so that no one will know I'm there. I wait and hear their voices fade out, then move closer to the door, but trip and one of the boxes falls over. I pause to see if anyone heard, then slowly put the books back inside. The closet door is cracked and some of the light comes in, and I see the books Daddy's sister sent Momma and that she sent back from church. One is not marked and has a leather flap, a string holding it closed.

It's a diary and when I open it, the dates are from years ago when Daddy's momma died. The writing is different from day to day and I recognize Momma's loopy letters in cursive, the writing of Daddy's sister, letters so much like Daddy's sharp script--As and Os big, Ts crossed low--but with a curl at the ends of her Ys, something Daddy doesn't do. They write of what Daddy's momma ate, how much she slept, and in the later pages when she sleeps all day, the

entries get longer, Momma's full of scripture verses, Daddy's sister's of what she remembered when she was a child.

Opaque bottles of perfume on her dresser, the dark eye shadow, lipstick that scared her as a girl. Her writing gets smaller and harder to read and I inch closer to the light. "She always put makeup on when she was about to change," she wrote.

I stay in the closet until the game is long over, and read of the medicine she and Daddy used to grind up and hide in her food when she threw the bottles away, still full, the horse whip Daddy stole from her closet and burned, and the black zip ties latched double around their wrists, ankles, that she used to tie them down to her bed where she kept them for hours, and the knives, washed and dried, she laid out on the porch when her husband left her, set neatly by copper pennies.

Fourteen

At church on Sunday, we move up to the room where the seven- and eight-year-olds are, and my sister wears her hair up like she had seen my cousin and I do. Before we go, Momma curls her bangs, lets her use the lotion she keeps in a blue container on the sink, helps her spread it on her face until her skin is soft and smells sweet like Momma's.

When we reach the new classroom, my sister's still shy and holds my hand as she did in the other room, and as Momma talks to our new teacher, a lady with black hair, I look across the hall to the room where the nine- and ten-year-olds are--where I would be if I didn't have to go with my sister. I look at those inside, singing to the praise and worship songs a man sings while he strums his guitar.

We watch a movie. It's about Esther, a story we know, Momma having told it to us many times, but the movie is different from the story Momma gives. The king's hair is long, and he wears a robe that looks like gold and lives in a house with curtains for walls that billow with the wind in every scene. The streets in the city are dirty, full of people carrying baskets of straw, and the houses are dusty, bleached with sun.

The scene I remember most isn't in Momma's story at all. A man leads girl in a white dress up stone steps to an altar where he presents her to a crowd and covers her face in a white shroud. He lifts her, lays her down on the altar, then pulls out a blade, and holds it high before he thrusts it down. The scene replays in my head through the rest of the movie, the man's hands on the hilt, the sun's glint on the blade, and the blood that I know will come after, but that I never see.

My sister's thinking of it, too, and when Momma picks us up, my sister holds her hands together, wrings each finger, one at a time, the way she does when her mind is on other things.

It's the first movie we've watched without Momma watching it before, choosing the parts to fast-forward, and for us to turn away. I hold her hand, and she stops the wringing and we are almost down the hallway when she looks up at Momma, asks why the girl died.

I squeeze her hand, but she pulls it free and makes a motion for Momma of the man who killed the girl, the way he held the knife high over his head and brought it down.

Momma kneels, holds my sister's hands in hers, looks to me. "What movie did you watch?"

I tell her it's about Esther, the queen who saves her people, and Momma takes us back to the room where we were. The kids are gone now, and the teacher is turning off the lights, and Momma asks to see the movie, the one we watched today.

She gives it to her, and Momma looks at the cover, the pictures along the back, the rating of NR at the bottom. The teacher says it's a Christian movie, but Momma doesn't stay, leaves the movie, the room, and goes to the car.

We never go back, but go to the sanctuary instead with Momma, sit next to her, our Bibles open as the pastor talks to us of the kings of Israel, of Saul, David, and Absalom. I underline the passages Momma does in her Bible and circle the same words she does, of the oil Samuel uses to anoint David, the stone David chooses when he slays Goliath, the branches of an oak tree that entangle Absalom's hair, and the three spears of Joab that fly through the heart of a king.

Fifteen

At night, I wake up, and Daddy's in the bathroom with a hanger in his mouth. Momma's crying, and stands beside him, puts a hand on his cheek, his head, prays for healing, but he bats her hand away, tells her she's hurting him more. I watch Daddy pull, eyes closed, spit, pull again. Blood on him, the sink, the floor.

He spins around, pushes past her to the kitchen, pulls out the knife drawer, picks the long skinny one we use for meat, saws the teeth loose. Closing his eyes, he hunches over the sink, holds the tooth in his hand, the broken half of another, and lifts them to the light of the moon outside.

Momma cleans up the mess, and I give Daddy paper towels, ice as he spits blood in a pot.

"Sometimes, we have to be our own doctors," says Daddy, his voice garbled by soggy red towels. His breath smells like wet pennies.

I think of when Daddy had an accident in the garage in the house we lived in before we came here, a saw missing the mark, cutting his thumb through. The skin and muscles were gone, but the bone was still there, I knew, because he showed me before he poured alcohol over it, bound it tight with ripped sheets Momma cut from the linen closet. I think of when he cut his head open, a wrench snapping loose when he fixed a pipe under the house, a towel held to his head until the bleeding slowed, and when the blood still seeped through band-aids, a piece of duct tape that held his skin together, leaving only a jagged scar when he pulled it off. He had said the same thing then.

I watch Momma as she washes Daddy's teeth and sets them on the counter. I pick them up. They're chipped, black grooves on the side, but the teeth are large, flat, much bigger than

mine. Momma's whispering under breath, closing her eyes when she dries her hands. She's praying, her lips forming the same words over and over again.

She goes to Daddy, empties his pot in the sink, brings it back, and they lay together on the floor, him up on one elbow, leaned over. She mirrors him, except with a hand she brings to his head then down his arm where his burn scar is, then repeats the same motion until Daddy is still. She doesn't say anything as she does this, but moves her hand gently, so that it barely touches him, but does, and he doesn't push her away.

Sixteen

The next day, Daddy stays in bed, and Momma's quiet as she wakes us up, puts on our jackets, and takes us to the car, but when she starts it, the gas gauge is almost empty. She turns it off, sits, and watches as the windshield starts to fog over.

She beckons us to follow as she gets out and leads us to Daddy's sister's backyard where she unlocks the fence, unearths a red wagon from a pile of old leaves and dirt from the year before. She doesn't wear gloves--she gave hers to my sister--but she scoops the muck out and brushes the wagon clean. She stands and her fingers are dirty, the knees of her jeans wet and stained, but she's smiling.

"We're going on an adventure," she says.

She pulls the wagon down the street, past the houses where my cousin's friends live, past her school, then stops in front of the new ones, the ones made of logs, the shutters painted green.

Momma kneels in front of my sister, looks at her face, speaks slow so that she can read her lips. "Remember the game we played for your birthday?"

She nods, and Momma points at the houses that line the street, chimneys smoking, driveways swept clean. "We're going to do that again."

And we do. But before we go to each house and knock on the door, Momma tells us what to say, what to ask for to fill the wagon. A can of green beans, two eggs, half an onion, two stalks of celery. They are different things than we asked for before and when people come to the door, Momma stays with the wagon just out of sight, comes to us when we have something, puts it in the wagon, no longer empty.

My sister loves the game and soon asks Momma for more things we can add to the wagon, a piece of bread, an apple, and when she thinks of something she's too happy to say, she

cups her mouth, motions Momma to lean down. "A marshmallow," she whispers, loud without knowing it, and Momma nods, points to the house we'll go to next.

We go all day, walk across the road to the houses with motor homes parked in driveways, to the two-story houses where the streets are dead ends. We go to the neighborhoods far away, where the people don't know us, and when we come back, fill the cupboards full, Daddy doesn't ask where we got the food, doesn't look when we cut the vegetables, cook them in oil, and serve them on plates rising with steam.

Seventeen

All week, my cousin sells tickets to *The Wizard of Oz* and when she shows them to me, the tickets are in a big roll that unwinds like a reel. Each ticket has numbers on them and when she comes home from school, I help her count them, how many she has left to sell. I can't buy any tickets, but Daddy's sister says she'll take us to the dress rehearsal, the practice show before the real thing.

Before we go, Momma helps us brush our hair, pin it back, smoothes out our clothes, and scrubs our shoes clean. We ride in Daddy's sister's car and when we go into the school, I take in the long hallways, the empty classrooms, and look for the desk that belongs to my cousin, for those belonging to the boys who sat next to her, imagine her writing notes that she gave to others, that they gave back--ones I'd seen her bring home in purple writing, hearts, flowers in the margins. Some she folded in a pattern, folded again and again in different directions until you pulled one end and the whole thing came free.

We go into the auditorium, and it's cold inside. Daddy's sister leads us to a row of metal benches, and we see the stage. There's a toy house, a white picket fence, and clouds painted in the background. The only play I had seen before was the Easter play at church, one that was the same each year, the pastor playing Jesus, the choir playing the disciples and townspeople, the alter call at the end after Jesus rose from the dead.

Daddy's sister takes pictures during the show and my favorite scenes are my cousin's, when she sings to the rainbow, when her house flies in the sky, when she makes friends with the lion, tin man, and scarecrow, and when she finally goes home. The show is beautiful, and my cousin remembers all her lines, does all the dances as she had practiced in her room. When the

witch forgets her line in the end scene, my cousin whispers it to her, something no one else catches, but I know, because of the way she moves, her lips small, so that no one sees.

At the end, we all cheer, and she runs up to us, still in her makeup and costume, holding her little dog, one her teacher brought every night for the show. She's hot, sweating from the stage lights, her face flushed as she beams at us. "You like it?"

Daddy's sister hugs her tight, congratulates her, her mouth near her hair, so that it is muffled and we all do the same before she goes backstage again. She talks fast on the way home, of the way the lighting was wrong at the beginning, the missed cues of the witch, and the way the dog wouldn't follow her in the tornado scene and that's why she had to pick him up and carry him throughout the rest of the play.

"We couldn't tell," says Daddy's sister. "It was perfect."

It's dark when we get home and Momma and my sister go up to the room above the garage where Daddy's sitting in his chair. I carry my cousin's costume inside her house--it has a rip that needs to be sewn--and Momma tells me to come up after I set it down.

When I drape it over her bed, my cousin is still singing her songs, twirling then she takes my hand and we're both dancing. I know the dance--I'd seen her dance the number many times--but she is much better than me, her legs strong, graceful as she steps in tune with the music in her head. We dance the tin man's dance, arms hooked then not as we skip around each other, then side by side. It's one of her fastest dances, but we had practiced it until she knew it and could do it without the music.

The dance ends, and I go up the stairs to the room above the garage, and it's dark except for the news stories on the TV. My sister's already lying down asleep, and I'm quiet as I change

into my pajamas, slip under the covers, too. Daddy's sitting in the chair and for a moment, I think he's asleep until I see Momma kneeling down next to him, her face shadowy in the light.

She's talking to him, then stops, whispers his name, stops, and says it again. He doesn't respond, his face unwavering from the TV's light, and Momma puts a hand on his arm. I watch them for what seems like a long time until Momma puts her head down over her hands and says nothing more.

Eighteen

Daddy's gone when we wake up, and Momma keeps us inside for the day, lets us play dress up with her clothes in the closet, but our favorite time is when she gets her jewelry box down from the shelf, a tin elephant where she keeps things she had as a girl.

It opens up in the middle and as Momma spreads the necklaces, the two-dollar bill from Grandma, I hold the front half of the elephant, trace its ears and trunk with my fingers. She has a lot of things inside--a half-dollar coin, a costume ring with a purple stone, old pennies--and tells us about each. She has a wallet-sized picture of herself in middle school, and we take turns with it, look at the girl in a red shirt, long hair, listen to Momma share stories about herself, a girl who gazed at the stars with her father at night before her parents divorced, who memorized the constellations, who wanted, above everything, to fly to the moon.

I think of her stories for the rest of the day, the weeks after, remember the drawings she made on a piece of paper of the stars she remembered. It's too early in the year to see them now, so she had marked the stars with a blue pen, connected the dots to make Andromeda, Cassiopeia, told us of the legends behind the stars. We love the story she tells of Perseus, and she saves the drawing she makes of the running man in the sky, his hand in a fist, and puts it in her elephant when she sets everything back. Every day after that, we look at Momma's elephant on the shelf when we play, at the things, the constellation we know is inside--of the hero who saves Andromeda, rescues her from the monster of the sea.

Nineteen

Every night, Daddy comes back, and there are no jobs, no money, and Momma watches the food in the cupboards and the refrigerator disappear, getting up early in the morning, counting the cans, then counting again and again. When there are no more things to count, she waits until Daddy leaves, then gets us up early like she did before. I think we're going into the neighborhoods again, but she leaves the wagon alone, and takes us to Daddy's sister's car where we drive to the bank, and Momma gets out an envelope from her purse, pulls out orange bills that look like wide checks, numbers printed in the corner like money.

I remember them from her tin elephant. Savings bonds, she called them. "My mom got them for you for when you go to college," she said, and I watch as she flattens them out as she sits and waits for the bank to open. We don't say anything as we wait, rub the sleep from our eyes, and look out the window at the sun coming over the pine trees. Nothing is open yet, and I count the cars in the parking lot, near empty, spy the people in their uniforms walking to work at Kmart, the dry cleaners, and the video store.

I remember when Momma first showed the savings bonds to me, us on her and Daddy's bed in the house we used to live in before we came here. She let me wear her ring with the purple stone, hold the silver dollar, then unfolded the bonds, the paper crinkling. Sometimes, she let me count them when she curled her hair, put on lotion before church, and I would reach in her dresser drawer, pull out the tin elephant, and lay the bonds out side by side. I liked the one with the seventy-five in the corner best--I could see the man's whole face, whereas in the others, they were turned to the side. The bonds felt thick in my hands, thicker than paper, and sometimes, I would hold them up to the light, see if I could see markings, water stains, like I had seen cashiers do to dollars at grocery stores.

Momma opens the car door when she sees someone inside, turning the sign from closed to open, and turns to us. "I need you to stay here," she says.

She sees my eyes on the papers she holds and puts a hand on my face. "We'll get them back," she says. "We need them now."

When she's gone, my sister and I wait and watch cars pull in the drive through and give money to the bank in cans that fly through tubes. One car has two kids wearing the paper crowns from Burger King, and I remember Momma putting those on us once, the feeling of it around our heads, tight, pushing our hair close to our foreheads, so we couldn't see. Another car comes with a dog, one that looks like the one our neighbor had at the house we lived in before now. It's black and has a large head, pants as it hangs its head out the window. Momma's gone a long time.

When she gets back, she has the money, and we go to the store and buy food. Momma's slow as she walks down the aisles, counts up the prices in her head, and we help her scan the shelves and pick out the least expensive things. We come home, put the things away, and Momma opens the windows, lets the cool air in, as she scrubs the refrigerator, the floors, and soon, everything smells clean.

She takes the phone, sits down outside on the top of the steps, closes the door and when my sister and I play on the floor, make a fort with blankets, the card table and chairs, I can hear Momma outside through the windows. She's talking to Grandma, and she's sad.

I think of the way she lays in bed now, more when Daddy's not home, says she's praying, but when I look, I don't see her mouth move, only her eyes looking to nowhere. Sometimes, I hear her crying in the bathroom when Daddy watches the news at night.

Moving closer to the window, so that I can hear, I catch pieces of the months we've stayed here. My sister's birthday, my cousin's play, our church lessons, things I know, but then Momma says a word I don't expect. Baby.

Twenty

For the days that Daddy's down the mountain, Momma volunteers to lead the outreach service and after school, her friends--the same ones we saw when we made the signs with babies--bring their children, and Momma teaches them Easter songs and how to mime the stories behind them. The church gives her a stereo to use, bed sheets for us to wear as costumes, and at the end of March, the month of April, Momma drives the church van down the mountain where the convalescent homes are.

My cousin comes with us, plays John, the disciple Jesus loves, and is seamless when she becomes him, a man who asks Jesus who will betray him and cares for his mother when Jesus dies. I play Peter who falls asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane, cuts off the Roman servant's ear when they take Jesus away, and falls to his knees when he hears the cock crow. My sister plays Jesus.

We go to a new hospital each week and as the nurses wheel the patients into the lobby, we put on our costumes and mime the story as Momma sits by the stereo, makes the music loud. My sister pretends to ride a donkey into Jerusalem, eat with her disciples, and pray in the garden. We watch Momma for cues, look to Jesus when we eat together for the last time, and cry when we see our Lord being whipped, tied to a post, on his head a crown of thorns. My sister plays like Momma had taught her to do, pretends everything's real, that the cross is heavy, that the walk to Golgotha is long. When Jesus is crucified, she holds her hands out to the side, looks up to the sky, and gives her spirit to God.

The nurses, people in wheelchairs, tubes in their throats, are quiet, eyes wondering, and when the songs are over, we take our costumes off and go sit next to them, pray for Jesus to come into their lives. I walk to a lady by the window, who doesn’t sit with the others, but who

watches us just the same, ask her for her name, and if I can pray for her, too. She takes my hand, doesn't let go, calls me child, says things I don't understand.

Her eyes are sad as she looks to the other kids, to me, and I want to stay, but our time is done, and Momma motions for us to leave as she takes the stereo, waves goodbye, and ushers us out the door. On the ride home, Momma tells my sister, the other kids what to do next time, to face the audience more, to move around the stage, be happy, sad in certain scenes. I listen absently, watch the hospital get smaller and smaller behind us as we head back up the mountain, think of the way the lady by the window smelled of soap, her fingers on my hands, her skin fragile, thin like moth wings.

Twenty-One

We get home from our last day of the Easter performances and for the first time since we've been here, the TV's off. Daddy's home and tells us about a maze he passed on his way down the mountain, a place along the highway, a maze fenced-in with four towers in the middle--checkpoints as you go through. He makes an outline of the towers with his hands, tells us about the different colored flags that fly from the top of each one, the other things there--a go cart track, miniature golf course, and arcade. He tells us that we'll go tomorrow and that he'll take the day off from looking for jobs.

It's hot when we go, and Daddy tells us to look out the windows and watch for the maze he saw. We pass by gas stations, the new Costco store, and then, we see it, and Daddy pulls in. The place is just like he said, a maze walled in with white fence planks, towers that look like tree houses inside, flags on the roofs. It's still morning when we get there, and the golf course and the batting cages are empty, but we go inside and the girl behind the desk gives us each a sheet of paper, the towers drawn on each one with a blank box next to it to mark off. She gives us pencils, too, and Daddy pays her, takes us to the maze.

Sitting at a picnic table with Momma, he motions for us to start, and we do. My sister goes in a different direction than I do, but I can hear the slap of her sandals when she's close, which isn't often, because the maze is long and soon, the sky is hot and the dead ends more frequent. She's at the third tower before I reach the first, and she calls to me, and I see her, face hot, hair wild, and she signs to me, tells me how to get there.

I never find the first tower, and when I lean down to the ground, look for my sister's sandaled feet, I see them on the other side of the maze, far from me, turning, running, turning again. I look for her now, no longer searching for the towers, and soon, I find a door and it's

where we started and my sister's already out, her sheet marked off. The one in my hands in still blank and Momma's holding my sister's paper, looks from it to the towers, at everything marked off.

On the way home, Daddy drives with the windows down, and Momma's asleep in the passenger's seat. She has her elbow on the window, rests her head on her hand, and I watch strands of her hair come loose from her ponytail, fly in the wind. She sleeps more now, slow to rise out of bed, and I watch as her chest rises and falls with each breath.

She's said nothing of the baby, and I wonder if Daddy knows, if he's seen her absently touch her stomach, linger in the bathroom, turned sideways, so she can see it grow in the mirror. I don't remember the time when she was carrying my sister, but I imagine it was the same with her, with me, Momma spending the mornings outside, breathing slow into the morning, hands clasped, unmoving, eyes looking to nowhere, thinking of nothing and everything.

Twenty-Two

The next morning, our front door is open, and the room is a mess. Momma and Daddy's bed is turned over, sheets strewn, the dresser drawers out, clothes everywhere. Daddy's pacing the room, and now stops at the counter, looks under the plates set out to dry, and when he doesn't find what he's searching for, he throws them down, and the dishes shatter on the floor. Daddy's lost his wallet again.

He's done this more now since he's started hunting for jobs, sets his things in strange places. Usually, it's his keys that he's lost, but when he loses his wallet, too, that's when he starts to throw things. Momma is searching too, but looks to Daddy when she hears more things crash.

My sister has woken up, too, and she's across the room before I can get up, on her hands and knees, peering behind the TV, on the floor by Momma and Daddy's bed.

I know what she's looking for--a wallet made of black leather, folded double with big pockets that hold his money cards, lottery tickets inside. The edges are faded, worn to a lighter hue, and while the wallet fits easily in his pocket, it takes up our entire palm. Last time, it was in the laundry hamper, the time before that on the window sill.

Daddy's still at the counter, makes wide sweeping motions with his hands, wipes everything onto the floor, and now there's glass, food, and water everywhere. My sister ignores it, and Momma backs into the corner, watching more than searching now.

Daddy turns to us and his face is red, eyes wild, and I rush over to where my sister is, look for the wallet, too. It isn't on the floor, under the clothes, in the closet, and we search for places we haven't thought of yet. Daddy looks at his watch, stops, runs his hand through his hair, sighs, and says we have a minute to find it.

I glance to see if Daddy's watching, then put a hand on my sister, sign it to her, and she nods, knowing already from the time before. I count down in my head, checking again places I've already gone over, remember the times the minute ran out, and we had nothing for him to see. My hands start to shake, and my vision blurs when I know it's coming again.

Daddy counts faster in his head than I do and when he goes out the front door, I know we have fifteen seconds left. My sister sees, too, and she runs to the door, watches him go down, screams for him to stop. She runs to the kitchen, slips on the glass, runs back, hands on her face. She's hysterical.

Daddy's getting the barbeque cleaning tool, the one he found in his sister's garage, one with a jagged edge he uses when we can't find his things.

Momma's crying, too, and she's still in the corner, starts to slide down to the ground against the wall until she's in a ball, knees to her chest. My sister's screams get louder when she sees Daddy coming back, the tool in his hand, and my breaths start to hitch when I see him come through the doorway.

He sees me first, strides toward me, wielding the tool like a sword, and I back against the wall, lower my head, hunch my shoulders, wait for him to take me. He grabs my arm, drags me to the center of the room, fingers jabbing at my pants, pulling them down. I don't move, don't help him as he struggles, and he jerks the waist of my pants down hard and I feel the material rip and come free. He throws me to my knees, and I feel the broken glass on the floor. The air is cool against my back, my legs that are exposed. His grip on my wrist tightens as he raises his other hand back, and I wait for the tool's cutting edge, for the teeth of it to catch on my skin, rip as Daddy will pull it free, do it again.

I close my eyes, then hear my sister scream, loud in one long breath as she crashes on top of me, into Daddy. In her hand is the wallet. She's breathless.

"I found it, Daddy."

She gives it to him, and Daddy takes it, lets me go. I look at where she was, and Daddy's chair cushion is pulled out, on the floor. It was a place I hadn't looked.

He says nothing as he steps back, pockets it, and we all watch him as he walks to the door, glass crunching beneath his feet. He leaves, and for what seems like hours, no one says anything, but stares at the door left open, the white sky beyond it, and the clouds that never seem to move.

Twenty-Three

For the rest of the day, we clean up the glass, throw away the shards, mop up the tiny pieces we can't see, and after Momma takes the trash away, she sits outside on the top of the stairs the way she does in the mornings now. I know she will be out there until late afternoon, that we won't have school today, and my sister and I stay inside.

We make Momma's and Daddy's bed, fold up our own sheets on the floor, scrub the bathroom, the walls, and the windowsills. I climb on the kitchen counters to clean the windows I can't reach from the floor, and I see that Momma's still at the top of the stairs, hasn't moved from where she sat hours before. Her back is hunched, elbows on knees, and her hands cover her face. Behind her fingers, I know her eyes are closed.

Beyond her, I see the school bus coming from down the street, and set my paper towels, the cleaning sprays down, and climb off the counter, motion my sister to the front door. We go outside, breathe in the fresh air, and watch the school bus stop, our cousin get out and wave as she walks to the house. Momma doesn't move.

My sister tries to get Momma's attention, pokes her arm, takes her hand. "See what we did, Momma?" she asks as she looks inside the door behind us, still open, to the surfaces we scrubbed clean.

She takes Momma's face, turns it to her. "Look what we did."

Momma smiles at her, but doesn't look inside. "Yes, I see."

For a moment, we stand beside her, then I ask her if we can see my cousin now that she's home from school, and Momma nods, but doesn't move as we clatter down the stairs, holding the handrails, so that we don't fall. My sister turns back to wave to Momma, and when she doesn't

see, I take my sister's hand and take her to my cousin's room where she's hunched down over a poster board, pictures, pens laid out on the floor.

She tells us it's the end-of-the-year project for school, a poster of your family heritage, and she points out the family tree, the empty spaces next to everyone's names where she will put pictures of them. The one she has of herself is a new one, her hair pulled back, lips drawn in a closed smile and she gives me others to sort through, to pick which one is best to use for the other names on the board.

I choose one of Daddy's sister laughing, her mouth open big, eyes scrunched closed and look through others of a man I don't recognize. It's her father, someone Momma said I met once as a baby, but I don't remember him. His eyes and hair are dark, his beard covers his cheeks and his chin, and in all the pictures, he doesn't smile.

"Do you remember your daddy?"

She seems to expect to question as she looks to the picture I'm holding, at the man staring back at her, then back to the board. "No," she says.

She gives me piles of pictures of Daddy's momma, his daddy, and some I recognize, some I don't. I had only seen Daddy's daddy a few times before he died, and my memory of him is fuzzy, of his white hair, wrinkled skin, and the smell of the thin brown cigarettes as he listened to the radio. I recognize more of the ones of Daddy's momma and shuffle through pictures of her blowing out candles at her birthday, holding my cousin on her lap as she read her stories, and standing in the kitchen--in the background, the jars of jellybeans I remember.

My cousin already has one picked out of Daddy, his face cut from the picture and when I pick it up, I see it's an older one, his face young, but the same, the same as his momma's, and I put their pictures side by side. Daddy's nose is more angular, but he has his momma's eyes, her

mouth, and the same small creases that start at the nose, angle out toward the jaw. I think of the diary I found under the stairs and wonder what happened when she changed, when she didn't take her medicine, if her eyes got big like Daddy's do when he's angry, if her lower jaw jutted out like his when he talks, if she became stronger when she beat her children, stronger than she ever was when she loved them.

Twenty-Four

Daddy gets a job painting a house, a one-time thing, but it's something, he says, and we all go over with him to help. It's an old home, one not too far from Daddy's sister's house, and Daddy brings in cans of white paint, brushes, and a paint tray he sets on the floor. He and Momma work in the kitchen, but before they do, they give us each a brush, a can of paint, and tell us to paint a room of our own.

My sister chooses the hallway. I choose the bathroom, and it's a faded yellow, dirty, unused for what must have been months. I open the window, let the breeze come in, work on the edges first, go around the floorboard, the sink, toilet, and the water hose in the wall. The paint is similar to the one we used to paint over the house we lived in before we came here, before the landlord came, and we had to leave. Momma had shown me how to hold the brush, so that it didn't drip, how to apply the paint thick, so I only had to use one coat, her hand over mine as she bent my wrists up and down as the brush slowly changed the colors on the wall. I try to remember her lessons now and don't let the paint drip on the floor as Momma showed me, but some parts I miss, and I smear them clean, hoping Daddy won't come in to see when I'm done.

I get a chair to get the higher parts, a chair my sister and I share and take turns with, and at the end of the day, Momma comes in, checks our work, and paints the sections by the ceiling we couldn't reach. I look out to the kitchen, and everything's white, and Daddy's cleaning up the paint brushes and hammering the paint lids closed. Momma pulls off the plastic covers she used over the counters and the stove, rolls everything up, and for a moment, we all stand quiet, look at the house we painted over.

Twenty-Five

When we go to the office to pick up the money afterwards, Daddy's happy as he comes back to the parking lot where we are, his skin flushed underneath white paint speckled on his face, arms, and hair. His thumb and forefinger are completely white along with a splotch on his forehead where he had touched his face, and he gets in the car, then looks back to us.

"You girls want to celebrate?"

My sister gasps, paint-speckled hands held together, kneading one another as she looks from Momma to Daddy, then to Momma again.

His eyes are bright now, and he raises his eyebrows when he talks and looks to us to answer.

"How about we all go to the movies!" His voice is loud and he holds the last word like the announcers do on game shows on TV. He holds his hands, and my sister screams, puts her own hands up, too.

"And popcorn," he says, looking to her, voice getting louder still. "And ice cream."

My sister echoes him now, her mouth big as she tries to imitate the way he says everything.

He holds the money up, the bills folded over, and turns around to start the car.

We go straight to the real movie theater, still in our paint clothes, to the one in town that has seats where you can watch the big screen in the dark, and Daddy buys the biggest tub of popcorn they have, finishes it before the previews are over, and sends us out to buy him more. He talks through the whole movie, tells Momma about how good of a job we did on the house, how they'll have to hire us again, and Momma nods, smiles, says nothing back.

When the movie's over, Daddy takes Momma's hand and points farther down the village walkway where the ice cream and fudge shops are. We get a cone each, dipped in chocolate with sprinkles on top, and Daddy points out the stores that were there when he was a boy and which ones are new. He makes Momma hold his ice cream when his goes in the toy store, then comes out with stuffed animals and a box with a bubble machine inside. He gets a necklace for Momma in a store that's full of glass cases, small glittering things inside, and after he pays the man behind the counter, he takes the necklace out of its case, tells Momma to turn around, and clasps it around her throat.

On the way home, Momma smiles, tells us to thank Daddy, and we do. When we drive up the driveway, it's late, the houses on the street are dark, but Daddy opens up the back of the car, and gets out the bubble machine, takes it out of the box. Daddy's sister and my cousin inside are asleep, so we try to be quiet, but Daddy's laughing as he puts together a big bubble wand, one that has a string tied to the end that makes the bubbles bigger or smaller, when you pull it toward you, let it go. He dips it in the liquid soap, pulls it out, runs with the wand in the air, string let out then in, creating a bubble bigger than him, my sister, and me.

Daddy runs back and dips it in again.

"More?" he asks us, loud, and we answer, loud in return.

He runs back and forth on the driveway, and we with him. The bubbles look strange at night, lit a greenish-yellow from the streetlights before the bubbles pop and are gone. I watch the way they float, how they follow Daddy's hands, obey when he cuts them off, allows them to be. Sometimes, he makes a bubble with my sister and I inside, a large one low to the ground, and I see the walls shimmering around us, until it breaks, and we feel the droplets fall.

Twenty-Six

In July, my cousin goes to Vacation Bible School at church, and every night, she comes back and brings things she made during the day. She gives us each salvation bracelets strung with different colored beads that show our sin, Christ's blood, our bodies clean again. I wear mine when Momma keeps us at home and Momma tells us we'll have our own Bible studies.

She gets a book, a hardback with a glossy cover of all the women of the Bible and we start with Eve, work our way up to Leah and Rachel, then Ruth and Naomi. We spend most of our time on Sarah, Hannah, Elisabeth, the women of longsuffering, who give their sons up to God, and Momma tells us of the son brought as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah, the son left at the temple in Shiloh, and the son who lived his life for God, who lost his head at the command of a king.

I keep the book when the lessons are done, go through the pages Momma skipped over, and I like these stories best, of Deborah who led an army to Mount Tabor on the plain of Esdraelon, Rahab who hid two spies on her roof, led them down the walls of Jericho before the city fell, and Jael who led Sisera into her tent, gave him milk to drink, covered him as he slept, then drove his head through with a stake.

Twenty-Seven

Daddy starts to take us with him down the mountain when he looks at the bulletin boards outside grocery stores, ones that call for house painters, people to weed empty lots and tells us to look inside the stores as he goes to the pay phone and calls the numbers for the jobs. We go in the Christian book store, gaze at rows of multi-colored Bibles, wooden angels without faces on glass shelves, but before we go, Momma kneels in front of us, holds our hands close, flat in front of our chests, and says, "Make shopping hands."

We wander the aisles inside, past the Jesus shirts, bumper stickers, and praise and worship CDs. A TV in the corner of the store plays a movie of Jesus. He's multiplying fish and bread for his people and as Momma goes through the store, my sister and I watch the screen, our hands still clasped as if praying.

Momma takes us to the candle store next door where everything smells sweet as she opens, closes glass lids, and lets us lean our faces close, smell pumpkin, lavender, and trees. Momma likes the white ones, ones that smell of cream, and carries one of the jars with her as we walk through the store, and smells it again before putting it back.

We go to the Christmas store last--one that sells Christmas all year--and angels, red reindeer made of glass line the aisles. Christmas trees lit with lights line the back of the store and my sister and I stop at each one, look at the ornaments that hang on the branches, at the reflections of our faces in each one. The biggest tree is decorated with ribbons, starting from the top and working their way down, and the ornaments on that one are shiny and look as if they are spun with gold. Along the tree skirt is fake snow.

Sometimes, Daddy comes in the stores looking for us, tells us he found something, that somebody might want him, us, to work, but most of time, he doesn't, and we go back outside,

wait in the car, drive up the mountain as we did the day before. At night, Momma and Daddy plan where they'll go next, what other cities to try, and when we've gone to all the circled places on the map, and Daddy says there's nowhere else to go, Momma stays up late writing, and in the morning, shows us what she wrote.

It's a speech, and as Daddy sleeps, Momma puts on our Sunday dresses, coaches us through the words. We go alone down the mountain, and Momma tells us to practice again, to read off her words about a deaf charity that we are a part of, why we need donations, that the money will go to something good. She tells us to ask for the owners, the managers, talk to them, tell them checks are okay, to make them out to her, not to tell them she's our momma.

We go to a tire store first, and I do as Momma says, read from the page, try to look up at the man's face as Momma had taught me to do, and he's nice, gives us a check signed with a big scrawl. We go to the outlet stores, the video stores, places that sell clothes, books, and shoes, and I do the same thing, say the same words, looking up more now, because I already know the speech. Sometimes, we go to the back of the store, to the offices where the owners are, and they hang up their phones, listen as we tell them about the charity, how it helps the deaf people. In the car dealerships, we have to wait to see the managers, but they are nice, too, and after each place, we go out to where Momma is waiting, hand over the checks, the business cards everyone gave us.

Momma goes to the bank on the way up the mountain, just before it closes, collects the money, puts it in her purse, and we are the last customers to leave. We celebrate with ice cream cones from McDonalds, and when get home, we get out of the car and climb up the stairs to where Daddy's in his chair, watching the news stories.

When we are inside, my sister goes to Daddy, hugs him, her face and hands still sticky, and when he doesn't respond, she looks to Momma before she cups her hand around her mouth, leans close to Daddy's ear. Her whispers are loud, but so are the news stories on TV, so I don't know what she says. She doesn't finish, because Momma takes her away, puts a finger to her own lips, and that's when Daddy looks at us.

He doesn't say anything, but clenches his jaw as he watches Momma take our Sunday clothes off, wash our hands, and send us to bed. When Momma and my sister close their eyes to pray before we go to sleep, I keep mine open, and that's when I see Daddy turn away. He moves his chair to face the TV again until it blocks the light coming from the screen and I can only see the top of his head and his hands on the armrests, clenching them into fists, then falling still.

Twenty-Eight

The next day, we get food to fill the cupboards again, toilet paper for the bathroom, gas for the car, and on the way home, Momma stops at a bookstore, gets a book she won't let us see. She keeps it wrapped in a bag until we get home, then takes it out, tells us to go outside while she reads it at the top of the stairs.

My cousin's gone when we ask for her, so my sister and I play in the yard, play Hide and Seek, hide behind bushes, under the trampoline, and chairs on the porch. Our game is interrupted when a big truck comes, stops at the house, and two men jump out, lower a ramp from the back. They say they have something for Daddy's sister and she comes outside, watches them load a big box on the dolly, haul it down, roll it up the driveway. It's a new stove.

Daddy's sister says it's wrong, she didn't order anything and they show her the invoice, the name of the person who ordered it. It's from Daddy.

I remember my sister's birthday when she and Momma made lasagna and bread in the kitchen, the yellow cake with white frosting and pink candles. They had taken turns cooking things for the meal, the noodles and tomatoes separate, washing the pot out before cooking in it again, and then I knew why. Only one eye was working--Momma had told me this later, but I didn't think Daddy knew.

The stove is made of stainless steel, has six new eyes on top, two more than she had before, and the oven is huge, a big window in front, so you can see what's cooking inside. Daddy's sister cries when they unwrap it from the box and take the old yellow stove out, put the new one in, hook it up, and she hugs us, runs up to where Momma's still reading at the top of the stairs.

We follow her there, and Momma has put the book down. They're hugging, and Daddy's sister is laughing as she talks and hugs her again. Momma smiles, laughs, too, but keeps looking at the truck, to Daddy's sister, the truck again. I can tell it's a surprise to her, too.

Daddy's sister leaves, and Momma takes us inside, sits us down, and opens the book she was reading before. It's a book of pictures of the body, and she turns to a chapter in the middle, of a baby like the ones we drew on posters when we stood by the highway, held them up to those passing by. She shows us the sac surrounding the baby, the umbilical cord, the baby growing in stages inside the mother, then she takes our hands, places them under her shirt where the skin is hard, firm, not like anything I've felt before, then says she's having a baby, too.

I don't ask questions, but look at the pictures, of the baby starting small, then getting bigger, its arms legs folding in as it curls into a ball, and I wonder how big the baby is now, if it has eyes, nails, and hair like the ones in the pictures. My sister asks when it will come, if it's a girl or a boy, and Momma says, later, and that she doesn't know.

Momma takes the book up, puts it away, and they go down the stairs to look at Daddy's sister stove, but I ask to stay. They leave and when I see them disappear in Daddy's sister's house, I climb the counters, get the book from the top of the refrigerator where Momma put it, then open it to the place we had looked before. I pass through chapters of the blood, the brain, pictures of the cells, neurons talking to each other, but when I reach the chapters of the babies, the pages won't open. I want to see how babies are made, how the baby comes from Momma to be real, but when I look closer to see, Momma's stapled those pages closed.

Twenty-Nine

For Daddy's birthday, we go a different way down the mountain where the roads are dark and covered with trees. I've never seen this side of the mountain, and Momma points out the hiking trails as we pass them and tells us of the times she and Daddy went up there after they met. Daddy slows the car down at the space on the side of the road where people can park to go up Castle Rock and lingers as Momma points down the dark path, to the peak we can't see.

She tells us of Wyhnemah, a girl who lived on the mountain when Native American tribes were here, of Pahwek, her love, how she would climb to the top of Castle Rock, watch him leave on hunting trips, then wait for his return.

"One time, he didn't come back," she says, "and Wyhnemah jumped off the top and died, so that she could be with him again."

We are all quiet when she tells us the story and when we reach the last bend going down the mountain, I see the peak, the bald rock face where I know Wyhnemah stood and waited for him. Nothing grows nearby until far below the rocks where the trees and brush begin, and I picture Momma and Daddy on the rock when they were young, feet perched on the edge, eyes looking to the sun.

I only see the peak for a short time, because then, we are down the mountain, and Daddy turns on a new road, one that leads to the river where he wants to go, to the Kern where the water is fed by melted snow from the mountains. Daddy says he'll teach us how to swim, to paddle our way past the rapids, where we'll see golden trout and beavers--animals we haven't seen in real life before.

When we get there, we pull into a gravel parking lot, and Daddy goes inside, registers us all for day on the Kern. He picks a red raft with a yellow stripe along the side, and we pick our

paddles, our lifejackets, and help him carry the raft to the river. Our strokes have to be strong, done together for us to move, and I watch Daddy lead us, make long strokes that look easy. I look ahead, to the map Momma holds of where the rapids are, see colors over each one to mark how dangerous they are, and imagine the way the water will rush under our feet and our bodies as the waves crash past, but before we get there, Daddy paddles us to the riverbank where it's calm, tells us to take off our lifejackets and jump in.

He dives down to the bottom, comes up with silt and smooth black stones. Momma stays in the boat as my sister and I slide in the water, hold the sides of the raft, and watch Daddy dive again. He finds what he's looking for and swims to us, hand out and we see rocks with veins of gold. He gives them to us and we watch the brassy lines in the rock shine in the light.

"Is it real?" my sister asks.

"No," says Daddy. "It's iron pyrite." Fool's gold.

He puts the rocks in the raft, takes my hand, pulls me out into the water where I can't touch the bottom, and my breaths get shaky from the cold. He takes my arm, twists, and in one motion, I'm on my back, my face to the sky. I try to turn over, to reach for him, but he keeps me there, one hand still on my wrist, the other under my back, and the water covers all of me but my face.

"Don't let go, Daddy," I say, but I can't hear myself or him, only the water moving past, a continuous shushing, full and deep. I fear the fish, water snakes I can't see, and Daddy looks at me, puts a hand to his chest, opens his mouth, and leans his head back, his shoulders, chest rising. He's telling me to breathe.

I open my mouth for air, look up and see the sky, a flock of white birds overhead. "Homing pigeons," he called them as we drove down the mountain. "People take them to the

valley and release them," said Daddy, "and the birds follow them up the mountain. Sometimes, they beat their masters home."

He points to them, and I can feel the vibrations of his voice through his hand. I close my eyes, breathe in, and smell the damp earth, red clay on the riverbanks, yellow dust on the pine trees, what guides these pigeons home.

Thirty

With the rest of the money we get for the deaf charity, Momma buys scrapbooks, colored paper, and special scissors that make designs, then goes to people's houses at night, makes presentations on how to preserve your pictures and memories on pages that will last a long time, won't yellow, ones that are acid-free. She brings my sister and me on these nights, and we help her show everyone the scrapbook pages she made, help them make their own, and encourage them to buy the most expensive things. Daddy's sister hosts a scrapbooking party, then one of her friends, then a friend of hers, but no one buys anything at these things. They eat the appetizers and cakes they made, make their free scrapbook page, thank Momma for her time, and tell her they'll buy something later. In a month, our closet is full of unopened boxes, bags of supplies Momma didn't sell, and when no one calls her anymore, she leaves the boxes there, sets clothes, shoes on top of them, and soon, we forget they're there.

She sees a flyer for the Air Fair, a day when people wander past rows of old airplanes and watch jets fly overhead as men with parachutes fall to the music of the "Star Spangled Banner." She applies to be a vendor and buys a table, draws designs in red, white, and blue on a tablecloth, and gets ingredients for cookies she will make in the shape of airplanes, different colored frostings for the wings, the windows, and the wheels. For days, we mix the cookies, shape and attach sticks to them, so people can hold and eat them like candy, and after Momma's frosted them, we put the cookies on big trays that we load into the car to take to the fairgrounds.

After Momma sets up, she waits for the customers to come, and Daddy takes us to see the airplanes, tells of the ones he saw as a boy. He shows us the Corsair, Mustang, Trojan, and the B-25 Mitchell Bomber. We read the signs in front of each one, touch the hot, shiny hulls, and Daddy holds us up to the cockpits, shows us what's inside, where men in years past sat and

controlled the planes. The owners of the planes nod, smile at us, and we walk past the other vendors, ones that sell ice cream, cotton candy, and shaved ice in little white cones.

When we reach Momma, her trays are still full, and the frosting is beginning to melt on the ones in the sun, and she gives us each one, tells us to walk around the fairgrounds, tell everyone how good they are, but not to eat them, because we'll have to sell those ones, too. The sticks in the cookies don't hold well and my sister drops hers, but we go around like Momma asks, exclaim how good they are, tell others they should try one, and every time we do, my sister and I look at each other, try not to laugh. It feels silly, and sometimes, we're dramatic, say in loud voices that it's the best thing we've ever eaten, that the frosting's the sweetest we ever had.

We go around the whole fairground, seeing who can be the loudest, the most convincing with our frosted airplanes, and on the way back, my sister takes a bite of the airplane she dropped before, but still carried and showed to the others she walked past. She plays with the cookie in her mouth, then hands it to me, wrinkling her nose while shaking her head. I try it.

It's dry, crumbles almost to a flakey dust in my mouth, and the batter doesn't taste sweet, but plain, almost like nothing, and I think of the flour Momma poured in the batter, the other ingredients, how we didn't eat any after she made them. I give it back, but when we get to Momma's table, we don't say anything as she starts packing up her trays, still full, folds up the tablecloth and the chair she sat in all day. We go back to Daddy's sister's house, to the room above the garage, and Momma leaves the cookies on the kitchen counter, sits on the stairs as Daddy watches the evening news, and my sister and I wrap them, then put them in plastic bags in the refrigerator. As we do, we watch the colors on the airplanes turn, the frostings reflecting the light on Daddy's television, and watch the colors move from whites to reds, to blues, then fade to black.

Thirty-One

The next morning, it's Sunday, and Daddy's still asleep when there's a knock at the door. Momma goes to see and there's a voice outside, and when I get up, I see her hands against the glass, her face peeking in. She smiles, waves, then knocks again. It's Grandma.

Daddy's at the door before Momma can answer it. He stares down at Momma and she backs away.

"What is she doing here?"

Grandma knocks again.

"Did you tell her to come here?"

Momma shakes her head, and Daddy looks behind him toward the door. He grabs his jacket and steps into his shoes.

When he opens the door, Grandma smiles and yells, her voice high and loud. Her hands are outstretched, her overnight bag at her feet, but Daddy pushes past her and goes down the stairs.

Grandma watches him go and lets her hands fall. She turns back to us and rolls her eyes.

They've never liked each other, said Momma, last time we went to see Grandma and Daddy didn't come. Daddy needed his space, and Grandma got in it, Momma said, and we never asked her again.

Grandma comes in and gets down on her knees to hug us. She kisses us and squeals when we kiss her back. She goes to Momma and hugs her, too.

I close the door and glimpse Daddy driving our car down the street. Grandma sees, too, and Momma says that Daddy has to work today.

We get ready for church and Grandma washes the dishes and cleans the counters while we get dressed and brush our teeth. Grandma drives us in her car and on the way there, we point out where our cousin goes to school, where the ski slopes are, and the campgrounds where sometimes, people would see bears.

We all go in the sanctuary, and Grandma stands with us during the praise and worship songs. We've never been to church with her before and my sister and I show her how we raise our hands when we sing the slow songs, clap and dance in the aisles like the other people do when the songs go fast and repeat over and over again. She laughs when she watches us and shakes her head when we try to pull her out to the aisle to dance, too.

When the last worship song ends, the pastor asks who is new and my sister and I raise Grandma's hand and she tries to keep it down. The pastor sees her and asks her to stand up, and she does while another songs plays and people come to greet her all while she casts glances back at us, smiles, and shakes her head.

After everyone has hugged her and shook her hand, the pastor gets up again and tells us that a guest is speaking today. A woman stands in the front row.

I look to Momma.

We've only left church in the middle of a service twice, both at churches we went to before we came to the mountains, once when the pastor's wife stood up to pray, another when the pastor said that we should love one another, even the homosexuals, a word forbidden at home.

Momma stands, and we leave.

On the way back, Grandma and Momma are quiet, and Momma sends my sister and I out to play, and we do. We play hide and seek and every time my sister counts, I hide by our front

door, still cracked, and listen to what Momma and Grandma talk about, what Momma says isn't right, and what Grandma says is.

Thirty-Two

After Grandma leaves and Daddy goes out again to look for want ads on bulletin boards, Momma sits us down and we think of businesses to start, ways to bring in money again. My sister thinks of the trash cans that roll away every week when the garbage truck comes, especially when it rains and the winds carry them down the street, and we decide to go with that--the trash can business--charge a dollar a week to take them out for the neighbors the night before, then bring them back in.

People like the idea when we go door-to-door and soon, we have half the street signed up and we mark their addresses down, go back week after week, chase the cans down the street, bring them back, and set lids back on tight. We get up early enough to follow the trash can people, watch them hang onto the back of the truck, jump off to dump the trash, haul bags of waste, then we jump out after they are done and put the cans back before following them again down the street. It's fun and every week, we check the houses off the list, the number of trash cans they have, the colors and shapes of them, go door-to-door again, and collect the money.

Every once in a while, the trash can customers will ask us to watch their dogs, feed their cats while they are away, and we go the night before they leave, take notes on how much to feed, water them, which ones get treats and stay inside during the day. Momma buys us wallets at the store to keep the money the customers give us and my sister picks a small one that zips up across the top, colors like a rainbow on the outside. The one I choose is green, folds like Daddy's, and has Velcro across the front to keep the money inside.

We keep them in our pockets, in our pillowcases when we go to bed, and at night, we sign to one another in the dark, about how much we have, how much to save, what we will buy when we have enough.

Thirty-Three

On the day that Daddy does find a job weeding an empty lot outside some houses, Momma says we should go with him while she stays home, to have what she calls, "special time," a time where we can be alone with Momma or Daddy. We've never had special time with Daddy, and we're excited when we get in the car, help Daddy buy trash bags and gloves from the store, and when we get to the lot, I recognize the houses next to it. One of them is the one we painted, and there's someone living inside, orange curtains on the windows, a light in the den. I wonder how they like their white house, if they've noticed the drips of paint I left in the bathroom and on the tile before I tried to wipe it clean.

Daddy gives us each a bag and gloves, and we get to work, pulling up dead grass and weeds that have thorns. Daddy works on the far side of the lot, fills up his bags faster than we do, and my sister and I share the tasks, pulling, stuffing a bag we hold between us. We show each other things we find in the weeds--bottle caps, broken glass, food wrappers--but as the day gets longer, hotter, we stop and throw the trash in with the weeds. It takes longer than Daddy tells us, and when the sun passes overhead, starts to sink over the mountains, we still have half the lot, more bags to fill and take home. We try to dig up the weeds faster, but our hands are tired, our stomachs hungry, but Daddy doesn't say anything, and neither do we.

It gets harder to see when it's dark, and Daddy gets a flashlight from the car, continues to work, and we look up from our trash bags to watch his beam of light bounce along the ground. When he comes over to us, we look away, back to the weeds we have left, but Daddy says it's enough, we've done what we can for today, and we look for dumpsters to throw the weeds away.

Thirty-Four

They never pay Daddy for weeding the lot. They said it wasn't done right, says Daddy, that he didn't do what they wanted, and we go to the park while he and Momma talk on the picnic bench.

I can only guess at what they say as Momma nods, pets Daddy's arm, looks away, then looks to him again. My cousin comes, too, and we stay on the playground, make up rules for an obstacle course for the race we will run--swing across the monkey bars, run across the moving bridge, go down the slide, and run back to touch the safe point. We don't have watches to time each other, so we count aloud, and my cousin is always fastest, able to swing across the bars two at a time and run down the slide instead on sitting down. When she wins, she puts her hands up in the air, bows, and sticks her tongue out at us, bright and pink.

It's funny when she does it, and we do it, too, laugh, do it again, and I hear Daddy call. I look to the picnic bench, but he's not there. He's at the edge of the playground. He'd been watching us the whole time, and I put a hand on my sister, and she looks, too.

He goes to the car, and Momma follows, motions for all of us to come, too, and we ride back home in quiet. Daddy looks at us in the rearview mirror, looks away, breathes hard, and although it's hot in the car, gooseflesh rushes up and down my arms. My cousin touches me, signs. "Are you in trouble?"

I sign back, small, so Daddy won't see. "I don't know."

We pull in the driveway, and Daddy shuts off the car, and we all get out, walk to the stairs to the room above the garage. My cousin goes to her porch, and I can feel her eyes watching us as we climb the stairs. I hear her voice, hard, unlike anything I've heard from her before.

"They didn't do anything."

Daddy turns around, breath catching, and I climb up the stairs faster.

"They did nothing wrong," she says, and her voice is controlled, and although I can't see her, I know how she's standing, hands on her hips, eyes up at Daddy.

Daddy lurches down the stairs, and Momma calls after him. My cousin doesn't move.

"This is none of your business," he hisses, and when I look, he's pointing to her, his hand inches from her face. "You know nothing."

He pauses between each word, his voice down to a growl, and I go inside, don't watch her leave, don't watch Daddy come up the stairs again.

We know what's coming next, and my sister and I wait at the end of the room, our backs to the walls and wait for him to pick who's he'll punish first. My sister wrings her hands, steps from one foot to another, breathes through her nose as she watches Daddy stop at the door, cross to the bed and sit. He calls us over.

"Get in a line," he says, and we do. My sister's in front, Daddy's looking at the floor, then looks up at her.

It scares me when he's like this, when he tries to hold himself back, and I watch for the stillness, the clenching of his fists, the closing of the eyes before he breaks, something I know he'll do.

"Do it again," he says.

My sister knows, too, and starts to cry, backs up against me.

"No, Daddy," she says. "I don't want to."

It's hard to understand her, because she's crying hard now, words blurred, as she draws herself in, hands to her chest, bowed low before him.

"I said," he says, and his voice is hard. "Do it again."

I'm shaking now, and I watch my sister take another step back, straighten, and hold her breath, her chest still hitching. Her face is red, and she looks to him. Daddy's face hasn't changed, and I watch the muscles of his forearms twitch, his fists grow tighter, so that parts of his hands are white.

She takes a breath, holds it again, then her tongue slides out, slowly as she looks to Daddy, and he springs free.

In an instant, she's on the floor on her back, and Daddy's on top of her, holding her down. She's screaming, and Daddy puts a hand over her face, his hand covering her forehead, her nose, and her eyes, as he takes his other hand, puts it in her mouth. She chokes, and he brings her tongue out, and with the hand that held her face down, makes a fist, hits her chin, then again, and again until she closes her eyes, bites her tongue through.

Blood is everywhere now, on her, on him, the floor, and he turns to me.

He turns to me, and we both fall to the floor. He's on top of my chest, and I can't breathe. I feel his hand on my face, feel it brush past my lips, and I taste my sister's blood.

"Do it," he says, and I can't see his face. Mine is covered by his hand, and I only see darkness.

I obey, but turn my head when he rams my jaw open, when he pulls my tongue past my teeth, turn it more when I know he will hit me, hit me as he did my sister, and it works. My back teeth bite down, the ones I know won't cut as bad, and I hear my tongue crunch between my teeth, feel my mouth fill, become hot as the blood comes.

I don't move when he gets up, don't look to my sister who is heaving on her hands and knees now, throwing up blood on the floor. She's crying between heaves, and Daddy kneels next to her. I can see his feet and her lurching body at the edge of my vision.

"Dry up," he says, then slaps her head, says it again, and she holds her mouth closed, leans back on her knees, head bowed as she holds her bloody hands to her mouth, fights her body to keep still.

I don't want to watch, but I do, and Momma picks us up, takes us to the bathroom where she washes our clothes and holds ice to our mouths. She closes the door, but I can hear Daddy turn on the TV and watch the news stories, because he plays them loud.

My sister's stopped crying and as Momma washes our faces, checks our mouths to see if they've stopped bleeding, my sister shows her where her tongue's been cut off, jagged where a piece is missing. Momma puts the ice back on, gives her a washcloth to put in her mouth, too, and we sit on the floor, wait for the bleeding to slow.

Momma pets our arms, holds my sister in her lap, rocks as she hums one of the worship songs from church.

"Your daddy still loves you, baby," she says, but neither of us say we know.

My sister doesn't move as Momma continues to rock her, and I get close to her face, and she looks. "I'm sorry," I sign. I don't care if Momma sees.

My sister furrows her eyebrows, tries to say something, but the ice, the bloody cloth is in the way. I sign again.

"I should have gone first."

Thirty-Five

It's a week before Momma lets us out of the house again when our mouths have started to heal, and we go to the movies, so Daddy can clear his mind. We drive to Starlight, where we went when we first came here, and Momma puts down the seats, tells us to sleep again. It's a quiet movie, one about two people who fall in love, and I watch the reflection in the window, the man brush the woman's hair away from her face, kiss her forehead, and it makes me sad. I don't know what they say to each other--Daddy's talking too loud, of the money we need, the jobs he cannot find--but I imagine words sweet and soft to the ears.

My sister's awake, too, and we sign in the dark. She doesn't move her mouth the way she does sometimes when she signs, words now strange when she tries to make them around a swollen tongue, spit that still tastes of blood. I know, because it's the same with me.

We sign of the stars, ones we see out the window. I like that the stars are brighter here on top of the mountain, not blanketed in smoke and fog as they were in the house we lived in before, and the constellations are easy to find. My sister finds the swan, one that Momma calls the Northern Cross, and she points to the long neck in the sky, its wings as it flies over what we know is the Milky Way. We look more, find the scorpion, and the eagle.

I find the lyre, an instrument Momma said Apollo gave to Orpheus, that he played for Hades to bring his wife back from the Underworld. The last one we find is Cephus, the house that lies on its side, and I turn to Momma to show her, because it's one we don't often see. Daddy's still talking, and Momma's looking ahead, her eyes blank the way they are when she's sitting outside on the top of the stairs, and I stop, then turn back to the window.

The house only has a few stars, but we like these constellations best, the ones that are harder to find, and we trace the house in the sky with our fingers, draw the floor, the roof, the walls, and it looks strong, even though it's toppled over on its side.

Thirty-Six

In the morning, Daddy talks to Momma, and Momma sends us out the door, tells us to play at Daddy's sister's house, and we do. We spend hours in my cousin's room, and she's cleaning before school starts again, and we go through her dresser drawers, the closet with her, and stumble across her things, the candy cigarettes, the *Seventeen* magazines. She gives us what she's going to throw away, a pair of white jeans, a blue skirt, and stickers left over from school projects the year before.

I put on the jeans and they smell of her, a faint scent of cinnamon and the aloe vera she wears on her skin. I like the way they feel, and I walk around in them, try to stand the way she does, weight on one leg, hands on hips, but stop when she looks out the window, waves, then tells us to follow her down the stairs.

One of her friends from school is outside, and my cousin says we're going to her house, but we pause, look to our house above the garage, and she sees.

"It's okay," she says. "She said you could go."

The girl's house is across the street, the same one where we watch the cats sometimes when they are away, and we play in their backyard. They have a swing set and a slide that my sister goes down while my cousin and the girl sit on the swings, talk about the boys at school. I don't know the boys, the one my cousin says works at the pool, is a lifeguard and works without a shirt on, or the one who has a driver's license, takes girls to movies at Starlight.

I don't have anything to say, so I go inside, see the girl's little sister, and she asks me to play upstairs. She has a play house in her room, one with white walls, a green roof, a door that's red, and we play that we're neighbors, say hello as we go outside to check our mail, water the gardens. She plays like my sister does when we play this game at home, except with imaginary

houses, her hands dainty and she holds her purse under her arm, wears a lace cloth over her shoulders as a shawl. She asks me to tea, and we set the table, set out the sugar, cups, and cream. I pour the tea for her from a pink teapot, pretend the tea's hot, that we have to blow on it to cool, and she looks up, away from our game.

One of their cats has come in. It's the calico, the smaller of the two, and he jumps on the dresser and watches us.

"He can't be in here," she says, and she tells him to go away. She shoos with her purse, and he steps to the side, jumps from the dresser to the table where the tea party is, spills the cups, the plates, the fake milk and cream.

The girl screams and goes after him, and when he darts under her bed, she stops, sighs, looks to me, and I watch her go to her door, shut it, then wriggle under the bed.

When she comes out, she has him. "He's been very bad," she says.

She pulls her pillow off the bed, takes off the case, wraps it over the cat, and holds him up. It looks like a money bag, one filled with gold coins like the money Robin Hood steals from the king in a movie I had seen last time we were in the video store, but then the cat moves and the pillow case writhes.

She hits the bag, and it moves more. "He must be punished," she says.

She does it again, again, and when the cat yowls under her hand, she feels to where his head is, opens his mouth and I can see the marks of where his teeth are beneath the sheet. She pushes into his mouth with her thumbs, and his movements become violent, claws finding their ways through the pillow case, and through all of it, the girl doesn't say a word.

Neither do I. I don't know what to say, where to look when she does these things. I can only think of what Momma does, of what I remember of her against the wall as she watches, eyes on Daddy, on us, moving only when everything's stopped.

The girl puts the pillow case down, and the cat runs away. We don't continue the game, but leave the cups, plates where they lie on the floor, and I go outside to where the others are, wait until we can all go home to the room above the garage.

They never ask us back, and I never tell anyone why.

Thirty-Seven

At night, Momma and Daddy stay up while the news stories play on the TV, talk about money from the government, and as Daddy falls asleep, Momma goes in the closet, goes through papers we kept from the house we lived in before. In the morning, she drives us down the mountain, and when we get to a brick building, an American flag on a pole out front, she gathers her papers, tells us to stay quiet as she takes us inside.

She takes a number from a red machine in the wall, and we sit on hard, metal chairs. There are a lot of people who wait with us, who watch for their number to flash up on the screen telling them which booth to go to and which person to see. A movie is playing at the corner of the room on a TV mounted from the ceiling. It's playing *The Neverending Story*, a film we aren't allowed to see, but as Momma fills out paperwork on a clipboard, we sneak glances at the corner, at the flying luck dragon, the horse that drowns.

Across from us is a man with two kids, a boy and a girl. He holds the girl in his arms while the boy runs to the entrance doors, tries to open them, comes back, then tries again. He isn't tall enough the reach the handles, so he pushes against the glass, opens it a little, but it's too heavy, and closes back each time, and the man smiles. He has tattoos of chains on his arms, the metal links shaded around his wrists tied together with a lock. There is no key.

Our number comes, and Momma gets up, motions for us to follow, and we go past the booths where other people sit and talk to workers in front of computer screens. We walk down the hall, around a corner, and find the number that matches ours. Momma tells us to sit on the floor as she sits down in a chair, pulls out the papers she brought from home.

The lady behind the computer screen brings out a calculator, looks at Momma's papers, and Momma talks about us, the baby that's coming, how she teaches us at home, and the lady

nods, doesn't look up from the numbers on the calculator. She gets out a chart, numbers in columns, shows it to Momma, points with her pen to where we are, to where we need to be for them to help us, and Momma shakes her head, says that was last year, that's not where we are now, but the lady says the same thing again. We made too much. We can try again next year.

Momma's quiet when the lady gives her back her papers, and when we go back through the waiting room, to our car outside, she gets in the driver's seat, closes the door, and sits still. We drive up the mountain, and it starts to rain, and Momma begins to sing. It's one of the worship songs from church, one we always sing near the end of worship before the sermon begins, a slow song where we tell God that we exalt Him and tell Him he's above everything.

She sings the chorus, a phrase that repeats over and over, and for a moment, I don't know why she sings when we've been turned away, the papers that would have saved us given back, but when I see her round the turns, she closes her eyes as the road begins to straighten ahead. She does this more the closer we get to home, and every time she does, she doesn't see the things I see.

Thirty-Eight

When my cousin goes back to school, Daddy's sister asks us if we want to come with them to buy my cousin new clothes and shoes for school, and we do. We go to Kmart, and Daddy's sister follows my cousin with a red cart as we all go through the aisles, pick out pens, paper, a purple stapler that she can put in her book bag. My cousin picks out clothes from the racks, shirts she holds up to herself, asks us if we think they are pretty, and Daddy's sister stays in the aisle with Momma where the baby clothes are.

Momma's looking at the newborn sizes, the yellows and greens, and Daddy's sister gets a blue one, holds it over Momma's belly, then trades it with a pink one, asks her if she's found a name. Momma hasn't talked about the baby much, and sometimes I forget one is coming until she touches it when she's on the phone with Grandma, a movement where she traces the designs on her shirt, stopping when she feels the baby move under her touch.

My cousin taps my shoulder and I turn to see her holding up two bras in different shades of pink, asking me which one she should choose, and I remember the first one she showed us in her room, the lace against her skin. I touch the ones she holds out in front of me and the material is soft, the padding in the cups yielding to my touch. I pick the lighter one and she agrees, goes to Daddy's sister's cart, and slips it in.

She goes on ahead to the shoes, picks out ones with heels, and I wait until everyone's ahead before I go to where Momma is. She's still by the baby clothes and picks up booties, baby caps that she looks at then puts back. The things smell different here, of powder and lotions, and I see her picking the bottles up, smelling them before putting those away, too. I look at the same things, and for a moment, I don't think Momma sees me. She's somewhere far away.

She pets a stacks of bibs in different colors, and lets them go, then looks to where everyone else has gone and follows them to the shoes. We pass the bras and I look at the ones my cousin was looking through. There are more pink ones, ones in red, blue, and green. Some are striped or have polka dots and the white ones in the corner are smaller and plain.

"How old do I have to be to wear one of those?"

She looks to where I point, then back ahead.

"You don't need to wear one of those," she says. "Jezebels wear them."

That's her word for women who have fallen from God, for the woman she pointed out to us last Sunday in church, the one in a leather jacket, heels, hoop earrings, her lips painted red. Momma had Jezebel's name highlighted in her Bible, underlined, then in her handwriting, repeated and circled in the margins, and I look to my cousin ahead of me. She's trying on new shoes, a white sandal on one foot, a brown one on the other, one with a higher heel, and she hobbles with the difference in height, then laughs when she trips and falls over.

She doesn't look like what I had imagined a Jezebel to be, but I don't tell Momma.

My cousin finishes shopping and we drive home, but I'm quiet as I look out the window, thinking only of the queen Momma had told us of many times, who turned the king to worship false gods, who killed God's prophets, and who died in Jezreel, thrown from a window, then eaten by the dogs.

Thirty-Nine

While my cousin's in school, I think Momma will start back up our own school at home, but she sits us down at the card table and makes a list of everyone we know. We list people from church, old neighbors, family we hardly see, and at first, I think it's a prayer list for Momma, one she makes often for when gets up early and prays at the top of the stairs outside, the names in her hand, but Momma puts dollar signs next to some of them, and I know that this list is different. We're going to ask them for money.

At night, she and Daddy take turns with the list, sit in the closet with the phone where they tell people of bills, the baby, and say we need the money to live. They only ask a few people at a time, Momma saying she wants to spread the money out, and some people say yes, others no, and Momma crosses their names out. Momma's daddy sends a lot of money and when his check comes, his is different than everyone else's, the amount written on a printer, the numbers in block letters, not by hand, his signature wild and hard to read.

When the mail comes, she and Daddy count up the money on a calculator, and we all go to the bank together, watch the lady behind the counter give us money back, counting each bill and putting them in stacks. Daddy takes us to the movies and we go down the mountain to the mall, buy new clothes, new shoes, and on the way back home, doughnuts for everyone. Sometimes, we drive all the way to the beach, and Daddy stops at the store, buys boogie boards, sand toys, beach towels, and we spend the day in the sun, watching the waves come in from the ocean. He talks with Momma as my sister and I build houses in the sand and fetch water in buckets to make the sand hard, to mold it into walls and windows.

We build until the sun starts to set, and the tide comes in. As Momma and Daddy pack up our things, my sister and I watch the waves come, roll past the walls we built, cover our houses made of sand until soon, everything is gone, and the sand looks as if we never came.

Forty

In October, the money's gone again, and Momma and Daddy go back to the list of names. They call each one, scratch their names off, until they reach the last one, Grandma, a name Daddy bristles at, says no when Momma begins to dial the number. "She won't send anything," he says.

They cross her name off, throw the list away, and when we go to store to buy food, Momma tells us to bring the money we've saved from the trash can business, from feeding cats and dogs on the weekends. In the check-out line, we open our wallets, give her our coins, the bills we have, and she pays the man behind the register who looks at us, at Momma, then us again.

We go to the church dinners on Wednesday nights after the service where we help out in the kitchen in the back, cut vegetables, frost cakes, wash the dishes, and when the other workers take trays of food out to the people waiting at the tables and chairs in the main room, Momma takes the apples, bread rolls still on the counter, and slips them into her purse. Sometimes, there are zucchini, squash, blocks of cheese she steals, too, and when we get home, she makes them into a meal and every night before we eat, Momma holds our hands, prays, and gives thanks to God.

Forty-One

For Halloween, my cousin is Anne Sullivan, a role she's in rehearsals for in *The Miracle Worker* at school, and she brings the costume home for the weekend, shows me the long skirt, the button-up blouse, and the shaded glasses rimmed with wire. On the night she gets dressed up, I help put her hair in a bun, spray it down, and as we stand in front of the mirror together, she practices her lines, fingerspelling the words with her right hand. She doesn't make any mistakes, and in between pinning pieces of stray hairs up, I spell Helen Keller's words back, ones that copy my cousin's as she teaches Helen the words for water, ground, and teacher.

I wish I could go with her around the neighborhood, with her friends from school, be her Helen, but Momma keeps us at home. She puts a stack of brochures next to the doors, ones she collected from church that tell of the evils of Halloween, of Satan's birthday, complete with pictures of witches, cauldrons, and blood. She passes them out to those who come to our house, to the Cinderellas, groups of ghosts, and the boys dressed as power rangers. When she gets tired and people are still coming to the door, she tells my sister and me to answer it, to give out the flyers, too.

I don't say anything as I drop one in each one of their bags, plastic pumpkins, and the kids look down at the paper, but it's too dark to see, and they leave, go home where they will read of Momma's goblins, the day of demons she and God condemn. I look for my cousin each time I open the door, but she never comes, and when the last of the children have gone, the house is quiet, and we go to bed.

There are a few brochures left, and I read one in the dark. The evil starts a long time ago with the spirits of the dead, and the illustrations are dark, spirits with red eyes and sharp teeth, fangs bared at they pass over houses where people live in fear. Some words are in all capital

letters and in bold. Satan. Evil. Darkness. There is a call for prayer on the back, a prayer I know, Momma having said it with us many times, of the cross, the grave, how He rose from the dead, all things we had known since we were young.

Forty-Two

Two weeks after Halloween, Daddy sets up Christmas lights outside and makes our house above the garage the brightest one on the street. He gives us bags of lights he got from the store, tells us to put them in piles according to color, string the strands together, and while he's outside, he wraps light strands across the banister, windows, the door, and Daddy's sister's house, too. Blue netted lights on the bushes, white on the black oak tree, red along the driveway. He tapes pink ones along the inside our house, lines the bathroom doorway, uses green in the closet.

He saves the rainbow ones, the roof for last and takes the staple gun and the duct tape before he goes out again. He tells me and my sister to come with him, and we climb the banister, up the gutters, to the roof, and Momma watches us from below.

We had done this years ago at the house we lived in before, and the roof shingles feel the same as they had then, rough like sandpaper, and we climb to the top as Daddy had shown us, leaning close to the roof, making sure we follow the rule of threes--always two hands and one foot touching the roof at the same time.

I'm holding the lights this time as Daddy takes my sister to the top, tells her to wait, then holds his hand out to me. I give him the lights, and he staples them down while I give him more and untangle the rest. Momma watches us from the ground now where she can see, and she looks small, far away, and I wave, but her figure is still, her hands on either side of her face as she steps from one foot to the other, then wrings her hands the way my sister does.

We watch Daddy staple the lights down until the stapler runs empty, and he fills it again, secures the strands along the side, then up and down again until we can barely see the shingles of the roof anymore, only a sea of wires, narrow lights waiting to be lit. When he is done, the wind

is cool, and he guides us down, so we don't crush the web of wires he's built, and when it's dark, he takes us outside again, stands us at the bottom of the stairs while he plugs the lights in.

Our house, everything around us becomes bright.

My sister screams, jumps in the air, hugs Daddy, but the light hurts my eyes, and I shade my face to see. The shadows are gone, and every surface of the room above the garage is lit in hues of whites, greens, pinks, and blues. But the roof is brightest of all, Daddy's web of light vivid against the night sky and Momma tells him it looks beautiful.

Forty-Three

We help in the church kitchen more now the closer it gets to Thanksgiving, when the church has extra dinners after the service, and Momma brings home new things, cans of pumpkin, beans, half a bag of marshmallows she says no one will need. Sometimes, she asks us for help, tells my sister and me to take things, too, the smaller rolls of bread that will fit in our pockets without us being seen, and we do, some nights making it a contest who can steal more. When we get back from helping on these days, we give everything we took to Momma, and she divides it up, spreads it out, so it will last until the next time we go.

No more money comes in the mail, and Momma goes to Daddy again, mentions Grandma, but he says no, and when we go to the movies, when Daddy needs to clear his mind, she turns to us, quiet, asks for the money we've made dragging in people's trash cans until soon, that money is gone, too. We wait until the days get colder, for the big meal we know the church will have on Thanksgiving Day, and Momma plans out the clothes we will wear, pants with extra pockets, jackets with wide sleeves, zippers on the inside and outside, too. She shows us how to put small things in the legs of our socks, how to hold our arms down to clutch something bigger than what will fit in the pockets.

But when that day comes, a storm comes through, a blizzard that knocks out power and closes down the roads and the service is cancelled, the dinner, too. For hours, Momma stares at the cabinets, opens, closes them, opens them again, fishes her hand in the back for anything she might have lost, but she doesn't find anything.

She prays with us at night, says we're fasting, something Jesus did for forty days when he was in the wilderness. "We are in the wilderness now," she says.

Forty-Four

After three days, Daddy leaves, and Momma motions us over to the bed, and we sleep against her skin. Our candles have burned down to nubs, and the room is full of shadows, but we sleep all day, woken only by Momma humming one of her worship songs. We don't get up for water--when we are asleep, we forget we're hungry.

Momma's belly is hard against us, and when it moves, I put a hand out to touch it, and Momma takes my hand, places it where the baby kicks under her skin. Her shirt is tighter than the other ones, and I see the baby roll around and when it stops, she smiles, tells me I did that, too, when she carried me.

We wait for Daddy to come home, and soon it's dark again, and the snow stops, and the moon comes out. Momma takes us outside to see, and everything's white, the houses, the streets, and the cars, too. The snow is fresh, and when we step out in our boots, our feet sink in until the snow hugs our legs, comes up past our knees. Momma lets us play, make angels in the snow, hold balls of it in our hands, and we eat it, feel the ice crunch between our teeth.

We go to bed, our hands still wet, our hair dusted with snowflakes we've picked up when we made the angels, and the power comes back on, lights bright overhead before Momma turns them off, tells us to go back to sleep. I pull the covers up, but before I close my eyes, I see Momma take the phone, go outside to the top of the stairs, and when she does, I get up, creep by the window, so I can hear.

She's calling Grandma, and I know by Momma's voice that she's woken her up. It's late.

I look outside for the car, for Daddy to pull in the driveway, but he never comes, and Momma stays on the phone, tells Grandma everything, that there's no money, no jobs, no food. I

listen until my eyes get tired, and I go back to bed, next to my sister, and when I wake up, the room's warm again.

Daddy's still gone, and Momma's awake, standing at the kitchen counter, looking out the windows. I know she's looking for Daddy, but I don't ask where he is. I know she doesn't know, and for the rest of the morning, we don't say things to each other, but take the mugs of heated water Momma's cooked on the stove to make us warm, sleep in her bed when she gets in it, pulls the covers over us all so that it's dark and we can't see anything.

We wake up when the door bursts open, and Daddy comes in, breathless, his coat crusted with ice, his face red from the cold. He's smiling, his eyebrows raised, and he lifts his hands, waits for us to greet him. Momma gets up, but no one asks him where he was. He answers us first.

"I did it," he says. "I sold the car."

"What do you mean?" says Momma.

Daddy puts his wallet on the counter, then takes something from his coat pocket.

"Pack your things," he says, then thrusts up his hand, the things he's holding in the air. They look like pieces of paper, brightly colored, with writing on them.

"Because we're going to Disneyland!"

Forty-Five

Disneyland is day's drive away, and Daddy borrows his sister's car, and when we get there, he gets a map, points out the rides we will go on first. It's our first time here, but Daddy's been here before, knows which rides are best, and he takes us on Star Tours, Space Mountain, and Pirates of the Caribbean. Space Mountain is his favorite and we ride that one the most, go through with our eyes open, eyes closed, hands up, hands down, and make faces for the camera that flashes during the steepest drop. Momma waits for us at the end of each ride, looks at the faces we made in the pictures, and Daddy buys the ones he likes, puts them in key chains and frames, then gives them to Momma to hold.

We eat near Tarzan's Treehouse, and Daddy sees a vendor he likes, rushes off, comes back with Mickey mouse cups, hats with ears for everyone, and we wear them for the rest of the day. We go on Space Mountain again and when the line gets too long, we go on the smaller rides, the flying swings, the Dumbo ride, and the spinning tea cups. Momma watches on these rides, too, and my sister and I hold on as Daddy spins the wheel, makes us spin faster than all the other cups around us. He's strong, and I try to follow his hands, but it makes me dizzy, and I look at what spins around us, the sky, the people, and the fence that keeps us inside.

When the lines are short, Daddy stays in the cup when the ride is over, waits for it to start again, and we spin faster each time. The wind is cool, but Daddy sweats at the wheel, eyes straight ahead, mouth tight, his lower jaw jutting out the way he does when he's angry, but I know that he's not, because he's not looking at me, at anyone. At the end, his jaw shifts and he looks at us again, face changed, eyebrows raised, asks us if we want more, and we always say yes, wait for him to turn the wheel once more, for the world to spin again.

He keeps going until the sun is gone, and we start the drive home. He talks about each ride, tells Momma as if she hadn't seen, and we chime in, say which ones were best. He drives fast as he talks, passes the cars ahead of us, and I look at the drivers as we pass by. Some of them are alone, some with sleeping passengers, but I only see them for a brief instant, Daddy already pulling in ahead of them before the oncoming cars come too close. I look up and the stars are blurred tonight, the clouds covering the constellations, the moon out of view. The car quiets as Momma falls asleep, but Daddy's voice is still loud, saying things he's said before.

He stops talking when there are lights behind us, and soon we are on the side of the road, a police car behind us, Daddy breathing hard, moving his hand through his hair, his lower jaw starting to jut out. I pretend I'm asleep when the officer comes, asks Daddy questions, takes his driver's license, and after a few moments, the policeman gives Daddy a piece of paper, his license back, lets us go.

There is no more talking from Daddy, only the breathing, the words he's holding back, tense in his muscles as he drives us up the mountain, faster than before, hugging each curve hard as we reach the snow, the ice near the top.

It's almost morning when we get to Daddy's sister's house, and as Daddy pulls in, we see a car that's new, one that wasn't there before. Daddy leans forward to see, at what's inside, who the things belong to, and someone appears on the driveway, walks toward us, and Daddy takes in a breath. Grandma is waiting for us.

Forty-Six

Daddy pulls the car back out of the driveway as soon as we get out and the wheels squeal when he pushes the gas, speeds down the street. I catch a glimpse of him, eyes ahead, face registering nothing, except for the pop of his jaw muscles as he grinds his teeth. I don't know where he's going.

Momma takes us inside and tells us to play while she and Grandma talk, but as Grandma walks through our room above the garage, we watch her open, close the refrigerator, the cabinets, and the drawers.

"Look at this," she says, pointing to the emptiness inside everything she opens, and Momma nods each time, says nothing.

Grandma looks in the bathroom, at our clothes washed and dried over the curtain rod, and touches the stiff fabric of Daddy's jeans, his wrinkled shirt. She shakes her head, clicks her tongue as she had been when opening and closing the cabinets in the kitchen. Leaning on the bathroom door frame, she looks at Momma, at us, and starts to cry.

My sister goes to her, wraps her arms around her, and I look to Momma before I follow, hug Grandma, too. Her skin is warm as she leans toward us, hugs us back, and I can smell the laundry soap on her clothes, one that smells of springtime. She pets our hair for a moment, then wipes her eyes before she looks at Momma.

"How long have you been out of food?"

Momma doesn't answer, but looks outside at where Daddy had gone, and Grandma walks over to her, follows her gaze down the empty street. For a moment, they watch the stillness of the snow, the trees outside, and Grandma puts a hand on Momma's back.

"Come on," says Grandma, and she turns around and starts gathering our things.

Momma watches her take clothes and shoes and put them in a pile in the middle of the room. "What are you doing?"

"You're coming with me," says Grandma. "You all are."

"He'll never go," says Momma, and I know she's talking about Daddy.

Grandma pauses, looks at her.

"He doesn't have to," she says.

Grandma goes to the bathroom, pulls the clothes off the shower rod, and adds them to the pile.

Momma doesn't stop her and soon, my sister and I join in. Grandma teaches us how to tie huge knapsacks--to lay a bed sheet out on the floor, pile our things in, then tie the corners together, so nothing comes loose. She makes it a game, and we see who can pack the most things, carry them across the room, and down the stairs to Grandma's car.

In a hour, the room is packed clean and Grandma's car is full. The only things we leave are the dishes, the scrapbooks and supplies Momma never sold, and Daddy's TV. The rest of the room is as it was before we moved in, the bed against the wall, stripped bare, the card table and chairs folded and put away, the window blinds closed.

We wait for Daddy to come back and when he does, Grandma takes us to the car while Momma and Daddy talk in the front yard, Daddy still outside on the street, the chain link fence between them. Grandma has the windows rolled up and I can't hear what they say, but I know that Daddy's angry, because he holds the fence tight, his hands in fists as he leans forward to talk to Momma, and Momma nods to everything he says, her hands flitting from her face, to her belly, then finally to her chest.

She says something to Daddy when she does this, words she repeats, and I watch her face to understand. She's crying, and her mouth is hard to read, but she says it again. "For me," she says. "Do it for me."

Forty-Seven

The ride north to Grandma's house is long and for hours, we drive down the mountain, through the desert, the city, and the onion fields beyond it. Grandma points out things as she drives, the vineyards, the big bridge across the bay, and finally the cow farms as we get closer to her house. Horses graze along alongside the road in pastures fenced in with barbed wire, and Grandma rolls down her window, sticks her head out, so that the wind whips through her hair and makes the sound of a horse whinnying loud. The ones close to the road lift their heads, answer, and Grandma pulls her head back in, looks at me in the rearview mirror and laughs.

"I love doing that," she says.

She does it again when we pass a farm where foals nurse from their mothers, jump and run when they hear Grandma call to them, and Grandma points out the ones born last month, who came into the world in the middle of the day as Grandma watched from beyond the fence. She talks to me and my sister almost the whole way of them, their spindly legs, tiny hooves, and mouths she kissed when they nuzzled her hands.

Her neighbors have horses, too, and when we reach her house, she waves and says hello to them as she parks the car in the driveway, picks up our things and takes them inside. Her house feels cool, the floors made of tile, the furniture large and draped with colored throws, the lamps on either sides of the couches made with tinted glass. My sister and I roam the rooms that smell of leather and soap, and the bathrooms have dried flowers hung upside down on the walls, their stems tied together with string. Grandma has a small bar of pink soap on all our pillows, a washcloth to match. She had known she would bring us here.

Daddy turns the TV on, sets it to the news channel, and Grandma and Momma bring our knapsacks in, put them in our rooms where my sister and I unpack them. My sister and I share a

room where we each have a bed, the white comforters marked with pink flowers and green trim, a design that matches the curtains. Grandma's room is across the hallway, Momma and Daddy's room next to hers, a crib already set up near their bed.

Momma cries when she sees it and touches the wooden frame and the soft baby blankets inside. The blankets are white and Momma holds them to her face, breathes in, smiles, and tells us it's the baby smell, one we will know soon.

Grandma shows us the others things she bought, things she pulls out from under Momma and Daddy's bed that she keeps in a laundry basket. Diapers, baby clothes with snap-on buttons, soap, and bottles. Some things we had seen Momma look at in stores, but others are new, and Grandma explains them to us, especially the ones she gives funny names to. The snot suckers are our favorite and we laugh when she shows them to us, when she makes funny faces as she attempts to demonstrate, and Momma laughs, too.

Momma's laugh is quiet, a sound she makes with her lips closed as she breathes out through her nose, and I pause to watch her and listen. It had been too long since I heard it last.

Momma laughs more when we go to the kitchen to make dinner, a feast of spaghetti, meat balls, and garlic bread. Grandma shows us the ice cream in the freezer, the root beer in old-fashioned glass bottles for the floats we will make after and she gets out the whipped cream, sprays some in each our mouths. It tastes sweet, and Grandma laughs loud when she misses on purpose, sprays the cream on our noses and our chins, and for a brief time, I forget the mountains we left behind.

Forty-Eight

In the mornings, Grandma takes my sister and me to the shop she owns in town where she makes window screens and shows us how she makes the frames, cuts them to size, then lays the screen out and secures it down. She has rows and rows of screwdrivers, nails, and tools that we've never seen and during breaks, she shows us the rollers, the hammers, the pointy tools, and big scissors she uses to cut rubber string. We help her find the tools she needs, hold them for her when she's not using them, and when she's done, she gives us each a penny and shows us how to fasten it in a vice, then lets us take a hammer, bend the penny over to its side, before she takes it out and gives it to us to keep in our pockets.

The customers come in the afternoons and we sit behind the counter by the cash register when they pick up their screens, drop off orders for more. Grandma knows them by name and tells us stories about each one when they leave, which ones had dogs, pools in their backyard when she went to measure their old screens.

When the shop isn't busy, she draws stick figures on the yellow notebook pads she keeps by the cash register, figures in the corner that move a little on each page until you flip through the whole thing, and it comes alive. She draws some jumping, kicking, flipping over in the air, then adds more details, a friend, a mountain that they both fall down, flipping over and over, before getting to the bottom and standing up again.

On the day that Momma has the baby, Grandma keep us at the shop all day, and when the shop closes, takes us home. We make dinner, get in our pajamas, and Grandma says we can stay up until the baby is born. She puts on a movies she likes, one we haven't seen, of people who sing and dance in the rain. She sings along with the movie, and when that one is over, she

puts on one about a carousel, how a man comes down from heaven after he dies, sees his daughter dance on the beach, but we don't finish this one. We fall asleep.

The phone rings in the morning, and Grandma wakes us up, tells us things as Momma tells her over the phone. The baby is here, a boy, and something is wrong.

Forty-Nine

The hospital smells strange, and Grandma takes us through hallways that are long, ones that all look the same until we reach the double-doors that lead to a nurse's station where the lady behind the desk points to the room where they have Momma. We go in, and Momma's in bed, Daddy in a chair, and the baby next to Momma, on his back in a crib on wheels.

I peer in, and he's awake, but I'm afraid to touch him, his body so small, hands, fingernails that look miniature next to mine. There is a thin coating of hair on his head and I reach in to touch it and it feels soft, almost downy, and I motion for my sister to do the same, and she does. Momma watches us and puts her hands over ours, pets him with us, on his head, his arms, his belly and I watch the baby's eyes as we do, but he doesn't seem to see us, his eyes elsewhere, his mouth open, wet but unmoving.

The nurse comes in and has a clipboard that she writes on and for a few moments, the room is quiet as the lady checks the baby's skin and his eyes, then writes things down. Grandma asks questions, and the nurse points out things on the baby, his yellow skin, his eyes that don't respond, the reflexes that aren't there. She snaps her fingers around the baby's head and when he doesn't turn, the nurse says a word we all know, deafness.

Grandma clicks her tongue the way she had when looking through our empty cabinet at home, and Daddy gets up and leaves the room. The nurse points to the baby and Grandma makes the noise again, shakes her head, and twists her mouth the way she does when she trying not to cry. She looks at Momma, but Momma is looking away.

"We need to do tests," says the nurse, and she lists everything on her clipboard--genetic diseases, a stroke in the womb--different things the doctors are looking for, and Momma interrupts her, her voice loud.

"No," she says, and the nurse tells her about the things listed on the clipboard again, but Momma cuts her off. "No, I don't want to know."

Fifty

The baby is different than what Momma told me he'd be like when we finally bring him home. He doesn't take the bottle and cries a lot when Momma holds him, walks him up and down the hallway at night. She had told me that the baby would look at me if I held him, that his tiny fingers would grasp my finger and that it would be the best feeling the world, but he never does any of these things.

He cries for hours and some nights, Grandma gets worried, stays up with her and tries to rock the baby, too, but other nights, Momma is alone when she passes by my bedroom door, rocking and shushing, and I get up to help her get the diapers, the baby clothes, and the rags she needs. She shows me how to hold him, feed him, and swaddle him tight, and when she learns little tricks that quiet him, she teaches them to me--to pet his back, his belly, bring your mouth close to him when you talk and sing to him, so that he can feel your breath on his skin, and I smell the baby smell Momma loves, of milk, powder, and something else I can't quite name.

I sit on the floor and close my eyes, sometimes, while Momma's still trying to comfort the baby, and Momma prays when she thinks I've fallen back asleep, different prayers than the ones she says with us during school time. She sounds sad when she talks to God and when she looks out the window, her prayers remind me of the ones she said in the mountains, prayers that repeat over and over again until they run together and I can't tell where one ends and another begins.

Fifty-One

At night, sometimes, Grandma takes me and my sister outside and we lay on the grass and look up at the sky. We miss stargazing with Momma, but Grandma knows the stars just as well and helps us find the constellations we love. She points out new ones, ones Momma hasn't told us about, and we listen to stories of Pegasus, a wild creature whom Bellerophon tried to tame, tried to ride to the top of Mount Olympus to live with the gods.

"But he never got there. The creature threw him off," says Grandma, and she mimes the story with her hands, her motions wild and big.

We tell her the stories that we know, of Perseus, the man with a fist whose drawing is still in Momma's elephant, and of Andromeda, his love that he rescues from the monster of the sea. We tell her about Cassiopeia and Grandma fills in the gaps in our stories, shares the things Momma never said.

Her motions get smaller, then her hands become still as she points out Cepheus--not a tilted house, but a king--one who chained his daughter to the sea for the monster he knew waited for her. Some of the story, we know, of Persues who rescues her, but the rest is new--the wedding where Perseus has to fight for Andromeda, where he takes his weapon, Medusa's head, and turns everyone into stone.

We are quiet when her story ends and lie still in the dark.

"Did they get away?" I ask, and Grandma nods, and points to where they are in the sky.

At first, I don't see them, and I put up my hand to follow hers and my sister does, too, until we both see them together, then Grandma lets her hand come back down, then we do the same.

She tells us they stayed in love, were happy, and had a daughter, and seven sons.

"I like that story," says my sister.

"I do, too."

Fifty-Two

When Momma's hospital bills come in, Grandma gets a new job as a clown for children's parties on the weekends. It's a job she used to have when Momma was a little girl, and Grandma takes me to the garage where she keeps her costume in a chest, a uniform with polka dots on one side, stripes on the other that she wears with a green wig and huge red shoes. She puts her make-up on in the mornings before she goes and when the house is still quiet in the mornings, she sits me in front of the mirror with her, shows me how to make her face white with a small sponge, to draw big arching eyebrows and lips that extend far beyond her own. She puts on a foam nose, slides on big gloves, and stands in front of the mirror, blinks a few times, and becomes someone new.

Her voice gets higher, her gloved hands come out in front of her, her legs hop around in her huge shoes when she walks, and it makes me laugh. "Potsy," she says is her name and she asks for mine and I play along. I like this game, and we keep it going until she has to leave and I wait all day until she comes back, washes the make-up off, and gives me her costume to fold up and put away until she goes out again.

I go with her once. It's my birthday and I'm turning eleven and Grandma says to pretend it's my own party we're going to and that the kids there are my friends. The party's at an empty warehouse with blow-up playgrounds inside, ones that Grandma calls, "bouncy castles," and as Grandma blows up balloons, makes them into animals for the kids, I jump in the bouncy castles until it's time to sing.

The birthday girl is young, younger than my sister, and I watch her smile as Grandma covers the girl's eyes until the cake with sparking candles is in front of her, then uncovers them when all is ready and the song has begun. Grandma's voice is the loudest and she dances around

everyone as they wish the girl a happy birthday and cheer as the girl blows out the candles. Grandma kneels down by the girl as people take pictures and laughs between flashes, then hugs the girl close so their faces are almost touching.

The girl opens presents that her parents lay out in front of her, and she screams when she tears the wrapping paper off to find plastic cooking sets and doll houses. While the parents gather around, kneel and take more pictures, I watch the other kids take off their party hats and play in the bouncy castles again. Two of them play a game I know.

They race each other to the inflatables, go inside, then down the slide, and around again, then down to where the parents are. It's an obstacle course, one like my cousin and I made in the mountains.

Fifty-Three

A month later, more of Momma's hospital bills come in the mail, now with red writing on them, Grandma stands in front of Momma, the envelopes in her hand and holds them up, so that she can see. "Look at this," she says, the same way she did when she came to the mountains and pointed out our empty cupboards, and holds the bills now in her fist as she points her other hand at Daddy in the den, says he needs to get a job. Momma says, she knows.

Daddy hears and the next day, we borrow Grandma's car to go to the bank. While Momma and Daddy sit in an office with a man who types on a computer, shows them numbers on the screen, I wait for them in the lobby and try to keep my brother quiet, but he's hungry and Momma forgot to bring an extra bottle. Though Momma told us to sit in the lobby chairs, I walk with him up and down the hallway, pat his back, and hold his head steady against mine.

I hold him, too, when we go to the store and buy food, new clothes, and shoes for everyone. On the way home, we stop at a flower store and Momma gets Grandma a bouquet of pink and orange flowers to take home and when she does, Daddy goes through the store, picks out stems from all the display vases and tells the lady behind the counter to wrap them all for Momma, then to keep two lilies aside, ones he gives to my sister and me. We hold the flowers in our laps on the drive home and my sister puts her lily in her hair and laughs when it keeps falling down.

When we bring the flowers in the house and show her our new shoes, she asks where we were, where we got the money, and Momma says that Daddy got a job painting houses like he did in the mountains. She says that they like him, they like all of us, but Grandma says nothing, only clicks her tongue and twists her mouth as Momma tells her of the house we painted today

and the colors we put on the walls. She tells her that we are working tomorrow, too, and that there is a bus we can all take to get there.

We leave the house during the day and go hiking when Grandma's home, sometimes waiting until it's dark before we take the bus home. That part, at least, was true. But after two weeks, Daddy gets tired and we stop going.

Momma tells Grandma that he's sick and that he'll go back to work soon, but Grandma never asks me if he does when she comes home from the screen shop or from the children's parties on the weekends and sees him watching the evening news again.

Fifty-Four

Sometimes, when Grandma's gone during the day, Momma will do Bible studies in the kitchen while Daddy's in the den. She shows me the studies she's done after, ones of certain words in Job, Psalms, and Isaiah--*trust, hope, and faith*. She keeps notebooks for her word studies, but faith has a notebook of its own, a small hardback journal with lined pages and on the cover, a picture of praying hands with golden script beneath it. This one is her favorite.

She puts us in our room during her studies, and leaves my brother with us before she closes the door, and usually, he sleeps while we play. When her studies run long, my sister and I sign to each other and tell each other stories of things that happened since we came here. I tell my sister of the party I went to with Grandma. My sister tells me of the baby calf born next door. We sign of our brother, and the way Momma and Grandma hold him differently--Momma with him close against her chest, Grandma with him on her knees, his head propped up in her hands. She likes to look at him, to do the reflex tests the nurse did at the hospital when Momma isn't looking, but I never know if he does what she wants, because she always twists her mouth and sighs before she gives him back to Momma.

Daddy never holds him.

When he wakes up, I hold him like Momma does, then walk with him around the room when he cries. Yesterday, his skin felt hot, and today, it's worse, and he cries even after I've done all Momma's tricks. Usually, Momma comes when he cries for a long time, opens the door to let us out, but she doesn't come today, and I'm afraid to open the door. Daddy's still in the den, the TV blaring loud.

Yesterday was the same, and Momma didn't come for hours, and my brother had soiled everything, his clothes, the blanket, the floor underneath, Momma's purse with the diapers and the bottles in the den where Daddy was, where we couldn't go.

These nights, my brother's cries are in my dreams. I dream that Daddy comes in the room. He has the barbeque cleaning tool. He tells us to get in a line.

I wake up sweating, my covers strewn off, my brother crying for real in the other room.

But tonight, it's different.

Tonight, I wake up in blood.

Fifty-Five

Momma hears me in the bathroom and comes in, but doesn't seem surprised at my bloody pajamas, the pink water in the sink as I try to scrub them clean. She motions me to the bathtub as she takes the pajamas from me, draws a bath, and talks quiet of things she says I now need to know, ones she calls, woman things.

She says my body can have babies now, is getting ready to be a wife, mother when I am older, but I must keep away from things that are not of God. She gets a piece of paper and draws our family in pen and the ink smears, because her hands are still wet from the sink.

We are stick figures in the rain and Daddy's form is tall and his head is big. Momma draws herself next to him, shorter and with long hair, then she draws my sister, then my brother is littlest of all. She draws a figure away from them, one taller than my sister, but with long hair like Momma's, and I know that it's me. She draws thunderclouds overhead, then a big umbrella over Daddy and my family, a little umbrella over me.

"When you come of age," says Momma, "your family can't protect you like when you were young."

She says that God will pass judgment now, that she can't protect me from the rain if I ever do or say something wrong. "God knows," she says. "He always knows."

She draws the clouds bigger, darker, and makes more raindrops coming down. They miss the big umbrella over my family and hit me instead. My umbrella isn't strong and falls through. The rain comes more and takes over me, long lines she draws up and down my body, the ink smearing again until I can't tell what or who was there before.

"You see?" she asks.

I nod, and she puts the drawing away, pulls a towel off the rack, and holds it out to me. She gets me new pajamas and after she puts new sheets on the bed, she covers me up, and kisses me good night.

When she leaves, I look out the window and search for the thunderclouds Momma drew, and they are everywhere. There's no rain--there hasn't been rain in weeks--but the clouds are dark without the sun, and I can't see the stars.

When we had looked at the stars in the mountains, Momma had pointed out the North Star, said we could use the stars as a map to guide us home if we were lost, but tonight, I don't see it. I don't see any of the stars and become afraid when I can't tell where North is, where anything is, at all.

Fifty-Six

The next morning, Momma and Daddy go to the bank and we stay home with Grandma. She teaches us to make sun catchers out of wax, ones that Grandma teaches kids to make when teachers invite her to schools and she gives us little metal frames to choose from, pours piles of wax crystals in each one until we've made a baking tray full of butterflies and birds. My sister's ones are the messiest, colors spilled all over the frame and mixed together, but they turn out to be the most beautiful when Grandma pulls them out of the oven, because they look like rainbows.

We watch them dry on the kitchen counter, pools of reds, oranges, and blues bubbling then setting down, and Grandma gives us ribbon to cut and tie through them. She shows us knots, the same ones we use to tie our shoes, and as we are finishing the last ones, Momma and Daddy come in the driveway.

They had borrowed Grandma's car and as we look out the window, there is another car behind that one, a white one with tinted windows and shiny black wheels. Daddy's at the wheel. Grandma makes a noise behind us and puts a hand over her mouth and my sister and I get up to run outside.

Momma is happy and holds out her hands to the car.

"Can you believe it?" she asks Grandma. "No money down. Brand new, and they just let us drive it off the lot."

Daddy shows us inside, and the car is huge, its large seats soft, almost oily from the spray they put on to protect it from stains. He points out the cup holders, the storage space, and the extra seats we didn't have in our old car and we cheer with each new thing he shows us, cheer again when he asks if we want to go for a ride.

He's left the car on and the air conditioner works in this one, so much more than our other car, and it's cold when we climb in. Momma stays home with Grandma and Daddy drives us past the neighbor's houses, rolls down the windows, and blares the radio music loud, so that it rattles the speakers. My sister feels it where she's sitting in the front seat and she looks over to where Daddy's dancing in his seat, his hands moving to his head, his arms pointing every which way and it makes us both laugh.

He gets on the interstate and the wind that comes through the windows make the music harder to hear, but I can feel the beats of it rattle me, moving through my seat and up my body until everything feels strange. We pass by the cow farms, the fairgrounds where people take long trailers full of horses, and when we reach the city limits, the clouds clear and we can see everything, even the mountain that Grandma says was a volcano long ago--one we've only pictures of until now, the clouds, the smog from the city always covering it.

My sister's dancing now, and she copies the moves Daddy makes, lifts her hands up in the air, waves them over her head like he does, and he pushes the car faster, until everything, the entire world, flies by as he closes his eyes and lets go of the wheel.

Fifty-Seven

Days go by and Daddy takes us on trips in the new car, to the beach where the coast is cold, to the volcano where we hike paths charred with fire, and to a forest with red trees taller than I had ever seen. Sometimes, we go every day, and Momma says it's to clear Daddy's mind, to get away from Grandma who waits for us at home and tells us of the new bills that came in mail, the calls we missed from the bank while we were gone.

Momma unplugs the phone on the days we do stay home, when Grandma is at the screen shop, and when she sees Grandma's car in the driveway, plugs it into the wall again, so that she doesn't know. I help her, sometimes, when she's busy with my brother, and watch for when the mail truck comes, run out to look for the envelopes with red stamps on them, pull them out and stuff them in a drawer where Momma keeps others just like it underneath her socks and underwear.

But when my brother gets sicker, Momma needs me, and I miss the time when the mail truck comes. He doesn't eat, can't eat or breathe, because of the coughing sounds he makes, hard, drawn out noises that sound strange from a baby. Momma pats his back, sits him up, tells him to breathe, and I see Grandma come in, the bills in her hand.

"What is this?" she asks, and Momma doesn't look, but holds my brother again, blows in his face, tells him to breathe again. He's choking.

Grandma comes over and Momma turns away, pats his back more, and Grandma puts a hand to my brother's head. "That doesn't sound right," she says, and she reaches out for him.

Momma tells Grandma that he's okay, and my brother coughs again, his skin turning red, then blanching as he draws a whistling breath.

"He's not okay," says Grandma. "Look at him. That's not normal. He needs a doctor. He's *been* needing a doctor."

Grandma makes another move to take him from Momma, and Momma makes a noise that's strange as she backs away, and she's crying.

"We don't have money for a doctor," she says, and Grandma says nothing, but turns toward the door, toward me, and holds up the bills she had brought in, the ones I missed today. She walks fast past me, and Momma follows her, grabs at Grandma's shirt, whispering words I can't make out. Momma knows where Grandma is going.

I follow them to the den, where Daddy's watching the news, and Grandma stops in front of the TV. Momma says no, pulls at her to leave, but Grandma stays and looks at Daddy hard, her voice low and gritty, and it scares me.

Daddy's still as he watches Grandma, as he looks to Momma who gets louder and tells Grandma she'll talk to him, to just let him be. I look at Daddy again and he's breathing slow, jaw clenching as he watches them, but Grandma stays, picks up the remote, and turns the TV off.

He gets up and his hands are opening, closing, and Momma gives my brother to me.

My brother's still coughing and screams when he has air, and I can't hear what anyone is saying. Daddy's shoulders are back and he looks tall as he looks down at Grandma.

My sister comes in and I motion her beside me. My brother is still screaming as he squirms in my grasp.

Grandma is yelling now, Momma, too, and still Daddy says nothing, but clenches his neck muscles like I had never seen him do before.

I give my brother to my sister.

Daddy rolls his head from side to side as if everything hurts him.

I step past them.

Grandma gets louder.

I go behind the TV stand.

No one sees me.

Momma has Grandma's arm, and Grandma is pushing her back, but no one touches Daddy.

Not until Grandma flings the bills at his face.

Daddy takes in a breath, and that's when I do it.

I push the TV as hard as I can, and it tumbles to the floor.

For a second, everyone quiets.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, then Daddy looks at me.

I feel my breath whoosh from my body.

I'm in the air.

Daddy has me, and I only see a whirl of ceiling, glimpses of Grandma running behind us until we are in his room.

Daddy locks the door.

He throws me down and it hurts when I hit the floor. I don't see my sister and that is when I become afraid. I've never been alone with Daddy before.

He gets something from under the bed.

The barbeque cleaning tool.

Grandma is screaming outside. "Goddamn, you," she says. "Goddamn, you," she says again and again.

My wrist cracks as he spins me around, and I feel his hands pulling at my clothes. I think of the other times, when he pulled my pants down until my skin was exposed, but today is different.

Today, I am bleeding, and I don't want him to see.

I pull back at my clothes, so that they stay on, and he pauses, and I can feel his muscles tense, then his breath as it spears through his teeth, and his weight as he comes down on top of me.

And beyond that, I remember nothing.

I remember only darkness.

Fifty-Eight

I wake up and Momma and Grandma are over me. I don't feel anything, and their voices sound as if they are coming from dreams, distorted and somewhere far away, but I remember what Grandma says.

"I'll kill him," she says. "I swear to God, I'll kill him," and I know she's talking about Daddy.

I don't know where Daddy is, because I'm asleep again, and when I wake up, it is night.

I'm in the car, and Momma's buckling me in. Daddy's in the driver's seat and my sister and brother are already strapped in. The houses on the street are dark, and I know that it's late. Momma sees that I'm awake, and puts her face down close to mine.

"We have to leave now," she says, and I look for Grandma, but I don't see her anywhere.

Momma closes the door.

I'm laying down in the seat, and it's hard to move to see outside. I'm in different clothes. My arm is wrapped and tied to my chest. Bags of ice are on my ribs. A blanket covers my legs, and everything hurts, so I keep still.

We back out of the driveway, and I see only the top of the window, the sky overhead, and it's dark from these new windows, the ones tinted, so no one can see in. I don't know where we are going, but I feel the car turning, then going faster beneath me.

It is quiet for a long time, and I hear only what has to be breathing and the coughing of my brother who is somewhere ahead of me. We stop twice at gas stations where Daddy fills the car with gas and then, we leave again, and I look out at the horizon where the sun is beginning to rise.

I see the mountains, the ones we left so long ago, and for a moment, I am happy that we are going back, until I watch them come close, then pass by. The snow is gone now, the trees bare and ugly, and I look for what I know is at the top, the frozen lake by the slopes, the houses whose chimneys give up plumes of smoke, and Daddy's sister's house at the end of the lane behind a black oak tree.

The mountains grow small, smaller than I ever remember them as we drive away toward the desert, and when they are gone, I look up at the sky again, and some of it is still night, the stars barely there.

I see ones I haven't seen in a long time and when I see Cepheus, I lift my hand to wake my sister, but I can't reach her. The house of stars is barely there, and I count the stars in the constellation to make sure it's the one I think I see, and it is. It hangs in the sky, tilted down like it always is, and I watch it until I can barely see it anymore.

I crane my head closer to the window, so that I can see it again before it completely disappears, and my breath fogs the glass. I move to wipe it clear, but then, the stars are gone. Only my fingers are where they used to be, and I touch the glass again, feeling the coldness from the air outside touch my skin.

I mark the stars like Momma did when she drew the constellations we would look for in the sky so long ago, movements slow as she would fill the stars in, naming each one, and connect them all together at the end, but then stop, my finger paused above the glass. The dots are already starting to disappear, my breath held, no longer warming the window, and I start again.

I make a new house, one that looks different than it did in the sky, the same number of stars, but upright, no longer leaning over on its side.

As I watch the fog fade from the glass and with it, my stars, the sun rises in the sky, and I see glimpses of where my fingerprints were, but I don't wipe them away.

VITA

Tawnysha Greene was born in Bremerhaven, Germany, the oldest of four children. Homeschooled through primary and secondary school, she enrolled in Auburn University in 2004 and graduated with honors in 2007 with a B.A. in English with a specialization in creative writing. She continued on with her studies at Auburn University and graduated in 2009 with an M.A. in English, then enrolled in the PhD program that same year at the University of Tennessee. In May 2013, she graduated from the University of Tennessee with a Doctorate of Philosophy in English.