

BIRDS OF MASSACHUSETTS

A written creative work submitted to the faculty of

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San Francisco State University

In partial fulfillment of

The Requirements for

The Degree

Master of Arts

In

English: Creative Writing

by

Steven Crawford Kennedy

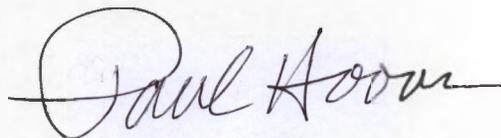
San Francisco, California

May 2019

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2019

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Birds of Massachusetts* by Steven Crawford Kennedy, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a written creative work submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree: Master of Arts in English: Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.



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Paul Hoover  
Professor of Creative Writing



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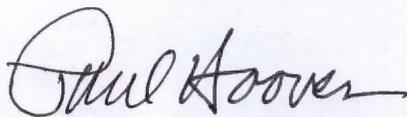
Maxine Chernoff  
Professor of Creative Writing

## BIRDS OF MASSACHUSETTS

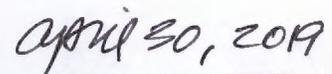
Steven Crawford Kennedy  
San Francisco, California  
2019

Birds of Massachusetts is a story about the relationship between an old lady with dementia and a young man, hired to spend time with her each day. Told from the perspective of the young man, the story details, through a direct address of the woman, the two's daily interactions through three seasons: autumn, winter and spring. The work is defined by its repetition, revealing the challenges and anxieties of the young man as he tries to care and understand for a person nearing the end of their life.

I certify that the Annotation is a correct representation of the content of this written creative work.



Chair, Written Creative Work Committee



Date

## I.

## Ernest Hemingway's 'A Day's Wait'

The story before 'A Natural History of the Dead' in *The Short Stories* by Ernest Hemingway is 'A Day's Wait.' I read this story silently to myself while you sleep. The sun is very warm through the kitchen window and though it is cold outside, it is warm in my chair and I am sweating just sitting there, reading, so I stand up and quietly take off my sweater. The hedge below the window is graying. The trees that line the yard are drying out and losing their leaves. In the summer, the view of the harbor is blocked by leaves but now that they are falling, I can see all the way from Eastern lighthouse down past the rocky neck in town to Granite Pier, pointing out from the bottom of the hill your house sits on.

You snore. I do not want to wake you. I fold my sweater and place it quietly over the back of my chair where I had placed my coat earlier. I came in, the same as always, I came into the kitchen and I sat down across from you and said good morning—the same as always—and I could tell that you did not know I was coming and I could tell by the way your eyes changed shapes as they moved over my face that you did not remember me.

The way your eyes change shapes remind me of water.

And when I had come in earlier and sat down in the chair across the table from you, your husband started gathering his things.

Where are you going? you asked.

To run some errands. And he looked at me. I'll be back at 1:15.

I nodded and he said goodbye to you and you turned away and told him that you would not be saying goodbye because husbands shouldn't leave their wives. You asked me if I felt the same way and I said yes but he would be back soon and he would not be gone for long. You shook your head and said again that you would not be saying goodbye and you put your head down on the table so your skirt of gray hair fell over your face and I could no longer see it. Your husband smiled at me and went down the stairs to the garage.

The story 'A Day's Wait' is short and that is why I picked it. I finish it while you sleep, the hump of your shoulder lifting unevenly with each breath.

While you sleep, you mumble something into the table. You say something like yes...oh yes those are lovely aren't they?

I glance up from my book and do not respond.

You talk in your sleep often. It is usually gibberish. You often say Wonderful! or, Goodness no! Once you said, A lot of birds flying around this morning. I can see their shadows—which I wrote down and worked out and is actually a haiku.

I start the story over again. It is only three or so pages.

The story is about a boy who is sick with a temperature of one hundred and two. The doctor says he has the flu and prescribes him some medicine to take. The boy's father reads to the boy in bed but he is not listening to the story. He sits there and does not sleep, which would be natural, but stares at the foot of his bed, looking "very strangely." The father closes the book and suggests the boy sleeps but the boy shakes him off. "You don't have to stay in here with me, Papa, if it bothers you," the boy says and the father says it does not bother him. The boy then clarifies "No, I mean, you don't have to stay if it's going to bother you." The father thinks this is a strange thing to say but does not give it more thought. When it is time, he gives the boy his medicine and decides to go out and get some air.

Again, you speak and say something about how dinner is on the table and it's nice to sit down as a family every now and then.

I do not look up. You are not talking to me.

The father takes the dog and goes hunting. He shoots some quail but misses more than he kills because it is cold and icy out and he does not have good footing, which is important when it comes to marksmanship. When the father returns to the house, the boy has refused to let anyone else enter his room. He did not want anybody to catch what he

had and told them to stay away. The father goes into the room and the boy does not look better. He still looks strangely at the foot of his bed. The father takes his temperature and the boy is concerned. He overheard the doctor and knows his temperature is at one hundred and two. The father assures him that there is nothing to worry about. He opens up the book and continues to read but again, the boy is not listening. He asks his father "About how long will it be before I die?" The father thinks this is a ridiculous question, but the boy persists and says that at his school in France he had heard that a person can't live with a temperature past forty-four. In that moment, at the boy's bedside, the father understands that his son is preparing to die. The line goes "He had been waiting to die all day, ever since nine o'clock in the morning" and the father reassures him that one hundred and two and forty-four is the difference between miles and kilometers and the boy would be fine. The boy understands and slowly relaxes. The next day he is without symptoms and the story ends saying that the boy was back to normal and "cried very easily at little things that were of no importance."

Your kitchen has gotten even hotter. I am still sweating and I wish I could take off another layer. You coo and shift your weight in your chair. I do not know how you sleep like that: head flat on the table, back bent at the hip, leaning in from your chair.

You shift in your chair, mumble, then, you wake.

You sit up and brush the hair from your eyes and when you reach for your hair you keep your eyes closed and do not open them until the hair is out from in front of your face. You look at me and your pupils are so small they appear pointed. You fold your hands on your lap and lean forward, sighing heavily.

Oh, it's warm in here.

Yes it is.

Making me tired.

Yes.

Oh, it's warm in here.

Yes it is.

Making me tired.

Yes.

Why don't you read me something while I just put my head down.

You sigh again as if you had just been relieved of a heavy bag.

Read me something short from that book you got.

I turn the page back to the beginning and start to read.

This story is called 'A Day's Wait' by Ernest Hemingway.

Oh how lovely, you say into the table.

I get to the part where the father notices his boy is not listening to the book he is reading when I notice you are not listening to the book I am reading. The hump of your shoulder falls. You are asleep but I continue on reading the story to myself and from your dreams you tell me you and your husband went dancing last night and stayed out late and that is why you are so tired.

\* \* \*

In the mornings I knock on the front door.

It is always open. Your husband cracks it open so I can let myself in. I do not need to knock, but I knock anyway because I want you to know that I am here. I knock on the front door because I want you to hear that someone is coming.

When I push open the door and step inside and into your home, I say hello. I say it, then I sing it. I try to sound happy when I sing my hell-o. I read somewhere that if I am happy, it will help you to be happy. I read somewhere that people with your sickness remember emotions rather than names. Or, I should say: they remember emotions better than names. The people with your sickness latch on to how people make them feel. I do not know if that is true for you, but I still sing my hell-o. I sing my hell-o and hope you

feel happy because of my cheery, sing-song tone as you hear the mysterious knock and wonder who is at the front door.

I enter your house. I sing my hell-o. I remind myself that I should be happy.

It is hard sometimes, coming into your house, knowing that I will not be known, knowing that the coming hours will be the same hours I've spent with you for however many days its been since I've been coming to you.

I wipe my feet on the mat and step into the long hallway that runs from the front door to the kitchen where you and your husband sit. There you sit at the table, watching television, eating breakfast, waiting for me. But you do not know you are waiting. You do not know that I am coming. You hear a knock on the front door. You hear me sing my hell-o and you turn to your husband and ask who is that? Who is that at the door? Your husband starts to get up, he puts his hand on your shoulder to make you feel okay and for support as he gets up from his chair. He has to get ready to go. He tells you who it is, telling you that I come every morning while he is out at work, or running errands. This is news to you. You do not remember me but you understand that your husband is going. He is gathering his things. You understand, suddenly, that this is what is happening on this morning that was like every other morning before there was a knock at the door, you heard someone sing hell-o, and your husband got up to go.

I am walking slow up your long hallway.

Why do you need to leave? Why does someone need to come and stay with me in my own house? I hear you ask these questions. I am getting deeper into your home, walking slow, slower, hearing you not understand as your husband gets up from the table to greet me, to get ready to go. He tells you that this is how its been for awhile now. He tells you that I come in the mornings, then take you into town to get lunch and that's how it has been for months now, but what are months to you? What is a year? A day? You do not remember any of this and then you hear a knock on your door and everything changes.

I try to make my steps soft. I walk slow. I don't want to intrude.

You have lived in this house your whole life—I see this walking the long hallway, getting deeper into your house, this home that you lived in for how many years is a life?

I see the picture of you as a girl in the yard. It looks like your first day of school. Your dress is pleated and firm, your shoes are white and socks pulled up. There is the front door I just walked through.

Even in black and white, your eyes are the same.

I see the picture of you and your sister sitting on a sled, waiting to ride the gentle slope of the hill this house is built on. Your eyes are the same even in snow.

I see the picture of you holding a newborn wrapped in a blue blanket. I see you and your husband kneeling at the altar.

I walk slower. I am getting deeper into your home and I feel the panic of being somewhere I should not be. I tell myself that I answered an ad. I am supposed to be here. This is my job. I parked in the driveway as I've done for months now. I knocked on the door at the time that was expected of me.

I hear you asking why.

Why is this happening?

I am in the hallway, getting deeper into your home.

On the wall: a college diploma, a painting of a shipwreck, children in bathing suits playing with the garden hose, a baptism, a photograph of a dog hanging its tongue in the garden. The dog stands over a stretch of knotted and chewed rope, its chocolate brown coat lit by the sun. It was summer then—I have seen a summer here. I expand the image in my head. Beyond the edges of the photograph is the hedge full of flickering wings. Tiny birds flitting in and out of the twigs and leaves, poking their heads out and moving from branch to feeder to branch to the stone bath. In the summer, in this photograph of the dog, the trees lining the yard are alight with green leaves. After rain, the bark is soaked dark and the leaves are lanterns of gelatinous color.

This is what you see each morning. Nothing about this has changed. Fall becomes winter. Winter becomes spring and the spring is short here, quickly turning into summer.

You have lived here your whole life. Each morning, you go out to sit at the kitchen table and look out the window. You see the dog. You see your two children in the sprinklers. You see them throwing a baseball. You see your husband tossing the hose, gathering the apples from the orchard. You see the neighbor on her knees behind the low stone wall. You see your sister in her swimsuit and she is calling for you to come down and hurry, she is heading to the quarry and doesn't want to wait much longer.

But now it is different—you heard a knock on the door. There was a hell-o. Something has changed and nothing has changed. You do not understand but you look up at me when I finally turn the corner into the kitchen.

Hell-o, I sing and you look up at me and smile.

Good morning, you say, and your eyes move over me.

Your husband mutes the TV, then leaves.

\* \* \*

I sit in the same chair each morning. I walk into the kitchen and sit there, across the table from you. It is a small chair. It is wooden with a rounded frame and legs and a flat back. Its seat is made of woven straw with a red cushion placed on top to make it more comfortable. It is more comfortable but not comfortable. The chair is small.

I sit in the chair and when I sit down in the chair, it makes a sound. The joints crackle like a fire when I sit. They negotiate my weight. When I move my leg and drape one knee over the other the joints squeal. I lean forward and the chair sounds. The chair is small. I can see you sitting in it as a kid. Feet hanging, swinging, making it squeak as you sit at the dinner table eating, not eating, moving your food around. Your cheeks are full like a squirrel. There is not a wrinkle on your face and your hair is tied in ribbons and pulled to either side of your head curling out like pom-poms from behind your ears. You are sitting in this chair, swinging your legs under the table trying to make the joints crackle like a fire. Your eyes are the same as they are now looking up, but keeping them low—making them mischievous. Your father and mother ignore you, knowing that you are making that sound on purpose. Your sister is copying you, trying to copy you—she is younger than you and smaller than you and that will always be the case. You have always reminded her of that. She is younger than you and smaller than you and I don't know where she sits, if she has her own chair, if her own chair is the same as yours as mine.

I come to your house and sit in the same chair across the table from you. You have your head down.

I'm just going to put my head down, you say. Let me know if anything interesting is happening.

You laugh and I say ok. I say ok and pick up a book from the stack of paperbacks on the table. I cross my leg over my other leg, settling in, thinking about nothing. The chair sounds: the straining wicker, the round pegs turning at their joints. I cross my leg over the other and the chair's joints crackle like a fire and you hear it and you know that legs are swinging, getting restless. I am sure both of your kids sat in this chair when they were younger. There is probably another of this chair somewhere—in storage or in another room. Two chairs for you and your sister. Two for your children. They sat at the table eating dinner, pushing their dinner around, swinging their legs under the table so their chairs would sound. They would look at each other, they would look at you and your husband. Your children do not really look like you—I've seen them in pictures. They look faintly like you, but they do not have your eyes, which means they can never really look like you. They swing their legs under the table, making the chairs sound. They pinch their lips to keep themselves from laughing. You do not get annoyed. Your husband gets annoyed. He rolls his eyes and tries to ignore it. You look up—I hear a fork clatter against a plate—you look up and ask

How's it going over there?

I look up from my book. Your head is still down, you're mumbling. I hear the water cracking in your throat.

How's it going over there?

and your children freeze, look at you and hang in a moment hang in your eyes—they can never tell if you are serious or not, angry or not, they can never tell if they are on the verge of some great fear or great joy—maybe it is in the eyes? They do not have your eyes. I do not have your eyes. We do not know, so we hang in a moment at the end of your eyes.

But you are sleeping now. I see the hump of your shoulder swell. You are snoring. I am settled in this chair, book open in my hands, looking at you. I do not want to move my head because I'm afraid that the movement will come with a sound and wake you. I am still. I am still. I am still in this chair. I do not want to wake you. You are sleeping, your head on the table, your hair skirting down from the blue line of skin where your hair begins. Your hair covers your face where your eyes are.

\* \* \*

We are not related you and I. None of your blood is in me. I am here in your kitchen, across the table from you, writing to you reading to you talking to you, because I answered an ad in the newspaper. Your husband still goes to work in the mornings, he needed someone to look after you while he was away at the office and running errands.

You can not be on your own, though you say otherwise. You are too old and sick. Your balance is not good. You had a stroke recently, it was your second in as many years. Your memory is going. When we drive into town and someone recognizes you on the street and they approach us and ask how you are doing and how your children are doing, you laugh and say fine fine everything's fine and you take their hand in yours and say to them I am so embarrassed but remind me who you are again. They are polite and whisper their name to you like it is the next line of a play and you are on stage and you say oh yes of course and laugh and repeat their name loud for the audience to hear. They nod and turn to me and say you must be the grandson and I say oh no I'm just a friend going out to lunch, or oh no I'm just the driver, and they smile and understand because it is small town—you have lived here a long time—and they know that you are not doing well. You have dementia, Alzheimer's, I think, I am not sure. You do not know what you have. You say your memory is not so good and chuckle because you are getting old. I couldn't even tell you how old I am, you say.

Your husband does not tell me what is wrong and I do not ask. He covers the assorted orange pill bottles at the middle of the table with a white tea towel when I walk in each morning. When he leaves, I could lift the towel and examine the labels, write down the names of the drugs and their dosages on a piece of paper and look them up when I am home but I do not and will not.

You are old and sick. I do not need to know that blood is clotting in your brain or neurons are dying and synaptic signaling is decreasing between cells to understand that. When I walk into your kitchen each morning you do not remember me. I sit down across the table from you and I see your mind working behind your eyes, trying to connect the world you see in front of you with the world you had laid out in your mind. I do not need to know that your brain is experiencing severe tissue loss and physically shrinking to understand that your mind, now, is deeper and more mysterious than ever and when you peel back your lips painted wet with lipstick and say to me, remind me who you are again, you are asking for the next line.

Remind me your name again.

It is my job to whisper back my name.

I whisper back my name.

I feel compelled to reassure you that I have never changed it. I have never told you a different name, a made-up one. I've never done that. The fact that I'm saying that makes it look like I have changed it, but I never have, I promise you. I could've changed it—I don't know why I would—but you could've asked for my name one morning and I could've said anything. Any name, that could've been me for the day. You would remember it in conversation. You'd address me in conversation using that name and then you would eventually fall asleep, wake up and ask me again, what is your name?

I could say any name, but I never have.

I promise you.

And besides, I think we've been together long enough now that you would know if I lied. You couldn't tell me my real name off the top of your head but you would know if I changed it. You would know. I would lie to you and you would say nothing. You would mouth the name. You would whisper it again as you bobbed your head along with each of its syllables, feeling the shape of it with your lips, something about it not being right.

I'm not a good liar anyway. I would mess it up somehow by some weird tick or uneasy smirk, adjusting my weight sitting in the chair across the table from you.

I'm too afraid to try anyway.

I think it's your eyes—I am afraid of your eyes. They are beautiful.

Eyes are windows to the soul, looking glasses, camera shutters, pools and black holes and possessors. All of this has been said about eyes. All of this is true about your eyes—they are beautiful and when I look at you and you are looking at me with those eyes I am so afraid because they are penetrating while being impenetrable. I am pinned by them, under a microscope with nowhere to go, nothing to do, but be seen.

You say, remind me your name again? And I think to change it but I don't. I look into your eyes and they are so beautiful and flat and I lean forward over the table between

us and whisper to you my name. You sit up and say the name aloud and nod because it is true.

\* \* \*

You pick up your head and your face is small, your lips pinched and delicate eyes. They don't move looking at me—then they flinch. You pull your hair back and your expression slackens. A release, like a sigh. You laugh and droop your head.

I thought you were my husband, you say.

Oh no. Just me.

I sit up in my chair so you can see that it is just me.

Did I tell you he took me dancing last night?

That sounds fun.

It was at a place in town, overlooking the water.

Sounds nice.

Oh, very nice.

You tell me that you had fish and wine.

You tell me it was warm so you sat on the deck under the string lights that were faint enough to see past them to the stars and moon. You could hear the water too. Water

lapped under the deck. You tell me the restaurant had a little music group out there playing old standbys, the classics from the radio when you were a kid. You knew the words and sang. You ate and danced and ate and danced.

Sounds very nice.

You'll have to go sometime. You can take someone—it is very romantic out on the deck.

Sounds very nice, I say again.

It was in town. Right on the water. The restaurant had a deck and a band was playing. We were eating and then, when the band started to play a song we liked, we popped right up and started to dance, our food still in our mouths! Oh it was wonderful. It was like when we were first married! Oh it was wonderful.

I nod and you sigh into the table. I look at you—your head is down and your eyes are closed and flinching like you are playing a film across the inside of your eyelids. For a moment I can see you in it: this memory of you dancing with your husband; this memory of night with stars out and black water, flecked yellow and silver stretching out beyond you. The tisk of the drum beat. The rain of piano keys. Wine and fish. I can hear the dull chime of rigging and lines off nearby masts, the silverware on dishware, the heels and laughter. I see you and it is you now and you then—a strange mix of the You in front of me and the You I have seen in the photographs around the house. Young and old—it is

You. I see you but you are far off, across the deck, half obscured by heads and lifting arms, tilting wine glasses and waiters in aprons taking orders and laying out dishes. There is this great busyness between us. I am not near you. The tisk of the drum beat. The rain of piano keys. Wine and fish. The dull chime of rigging and silverware. Limbs and lives between us. You and your husband turn and turn. I can't see your face—your hair wisps as you turn. You and your husband lean in and say something to each other I can not hear.

Everything is turning and rolling on...and now all of it is gone.

You'll have to go sometime, you say. You can take someone—it is very romantic out on the deck.

Sounds very nice, I say again.

You close your eyes tight and I can see that you are replaying the memory again in your head as it drops to the table.

You settle into it, your sleep and dreams.

And of course, last night was cold. The first cold night—a night you feel rage against your throat as the breath goes down. You did not go out dancing, but what did I do last night?

I sit back in my chair. It is so warm in your kitchen with the sun out and radiating through the glass. The sky is clear and unbroken—it looks like it could be the first warm day of spring.

But what did I do last night?

I hear the wind barreling past my window. The papered page. My eyes out of focus on the papered page, listening to the wind. Feet under the pillow on my couch, thinking about the thermostat. Resisting the urge to turn on the heat, hunkering down into the couch with an aluminum beer.

\* \* \*

Here I am in my basement room. I have my copy of Moby Dick split open on my stomach, face down on my stomach. I am not reading it but listening to the wind against the window, my only window in my basement room, there on the adjacent wall above my desk. The pane is painted black with night—it gets dark early now. In the summer, it would still be light out now, and even though my room is in the basement and the window is level to the ground looking out to the woods behind the house, I could still read by the natural light coming through the glass. In the summer, I was in sync with this light. The sun would go down at just the right time as I'd start to tire. My room would get dark and my eyes would get heavy. I would close my book, and my head would go to the pillow.

It was so hot then. It feels impossible that it was ever, or could ever be, that hot now that summer is over and it is so cold at night. It was damp then too. My towel in the bathroom never dried, so I'd have to hang it on the line outside. It got rained on a couple of times—rain comes fast here in the summer and a couple of times I had forgotten about it outside on the line. I don't think about the towel until I need the towel. Oh shit—I remember getting out of the shower and realizing my towel is hanging outside on the line.

The window in my room would always be open in the summer. The sound of birds and peepers and insects would sift through the black mesh of the screen and fill the room with a constant sound. The sound roughed up the air. It was textured and hot with unseen bodies colliding and shells being shucked and wood being chewed. I loved the sound of leather feathers and wind sigh and wood crack and like I said before wood being chewed.

It feels so long ago now. It feels impossible—summer and its heat—sitting here on my couch in the foxing lamp light.

I cover my legs in a blanket and bury my feet under a pillow. I take a sip of beer. I pick up the book and read the first line and the first line goes Call me Ishmael.

Call me Ishmael it goes and then the words continue on, but I stop to sneeze because the dust coming up from the book—I have not opened it in a long time. The pages are yellow and still damp from summer.

I listen to the laundry machine run on the other side of the wall. It taps against the thin plaster like water against a boat's hull. It clucks against the thin wood and plaster and it is like I am berthed below deck, halfway underwater. It is a wonderful feeling. I am safe, having hollowed out a space for myself amongst the unfathomable black of the ocean.

I lay the book down again. I get such comfort from this, I get this strange feeling of certainty sitting on this couch, my couch in my room, while the wind goes outside the window and the laundry machine runs on the other side of the wall. It is like I am wrapped up, protected and removed from the constant sounds knocking against my ears. I do not need to address them. I am not responsible for their noise. I think of you speaking out, talking from your dreams—it is terrifying at first but I have to remind myself that you are not talking to me. I have to make that table between us a window, or a plaster wall, so I can just sit and listen without having to worry about what you say. I can just sit back and listen. Lift up a book and make its pages a wall—you are not talking to me.

The reading light casts a dim veil over the rest of my room. I am wombed. There is my bed—just a mattress on the floor. There is my desk under the window with some notebooks and papers and some books stacked on it. Its chair is there too, pulled out slightly and piled with clothes waiting to be folded and clothes already worn. A pair of pants worn yesterday hang their legs over the wooden back—I will probably wear these

tomorrow. There are my books, pushed against the wall in four columns. They have been there since I moved here and unboxed them. They went from boxes in my car to columns in my room against the wall. Some of them I have read and loved and held onto and lugged out here and the majority of others I have bought and never read but hold onto and lug because I should read them, I know I should. Here is Moby Dick open on my stomach. It's a classic, something I should read and never have. I picked it up from a fifty cent bin outside of a bookstore in San Francisco. I remember buying it at the counter with the change I had in my pocket and then, because it was so compact—one of those drugstore-sized editions—I put it directly into my coat pocket. It felt wonderful to do that: to walk around San Francisco with Herman Melville's Moby Dick in my coat pocket.

Here it is again: Moby Dick open on my stomach, close to me.

I had spotted it on top of one of my columns of books and thought about how I've never read it. I picked it up and sat down on the couch, but before I opened to the first page I realized that I wanted a beer. I went to the fridge and opened a beer and took a sip there at the fridge before crossing back across the room. I sat down on the couch, put my feet up, sipped the beer, and opened the book. I leafed through the yellowed pages to see the size of the font and how long the first chapter was and how many pages in total there were. I leafed through the pages with my forefinger and thumb rubbing against the pulp,

flicking up tiny dust particles and that stagnant damp smell—I sneezed. I closed the book and sneezed again. The wind kicked up outside and the laundry machine turned on. One of the tenants who lived above me was starting a load.

I take a sip of beer and think about my day with you tomorrow.

It will probably be the same as it was today. We will have the same conversation. You will say tell me about yourself? And I will shrug, not knowing where to start or what to say. I'll say, I moved here from California and you'll nod, your eyes closed in concentration. California, now that is interesting. And what do your parents do? They're retired, I'll say and you'll smile and look up at me: sounds like the life, you'll say. You'll ask me what I do. What do you mean? I'll say. You'll look down and ask, slowly and deliberately, tapping the table with your hand in order to clarify: what do you do when you're not here with me? You always ask me this and I don't have a good answer. What I do is I spend time with you. This is my job. You ask what do you do? and I don't really have an answer to that other than I come here. I spend time with you.

I've realized now that at my age what do you do? is the question people ask each other. I think about how I go to parties and stand in apartment kitchens, talking to people I kind of know, and they always ask me what do you do? and my response is often rambling and inarticulate and I just end up talking about you.

I work with an old woman who has dementia, I explain. I go to her house and sit with her and read to her and I take her to lunch and then bring her back home.

That is so interesting, the people say and they ask about you, they want to know who you are and what you're like. They ask like I have the answer, like it is possible for me to know the answer and tell them confidently that this is who you are.

Very stubborn—that is always the first thing that comes to mind. I think about how I get your coffee when we are out for lunch, reminding you that you should not put too much sugar into it because sugar is bad for you and you look at me and chuckle, continuing to lift spoon after spoon of white sugar into your cup, saying I didn't know you were such an expert in nutrition.

I guess you are very snarky, too, which goes well with stubbornness. I think about how whenever you ask me a question and I respond with a shrug—an I-don't-know—you laugh. You mock my shrug, saying I-da-ho, Alaska. You always ask me what my parents are doing that morning and I shrug, I don't know. What do you have planned for this weekend? I shrug, I don't know. You roll your eyes and whistle: I-da-ho, Alaska. You laugh as if it's the first time you told that joke and I nod to say ok ok I get it.

You are very outgoing too. I think about how you listen to other people at nearby tables when we're at lunch, how you lean into their conversations—it makes me so uncomfortable.

You sound like very interesting people, you say, where are you from?

We're from New Jersey, they say and you go, New Jersey! Wonderful! Well, I'm from here and you've picked a wonderful place to visit. You charm them with a smile and then look back at me: Introduce yourself, you say and I lean in and shake these strangers' hands because you made me and I can feel the heat flattening against the front of my face. I grew up here my whole life you tell them again and they are very polite, saying that it must've been quite special to grow up in such a beautiful place. You nod, yes, oh, it was wonderful, and you ask again, where are you from? And there is a pause—my face is burning and looking down—and the people from New Jersey say, we're up visiting from New Jersey.

New Jersey! Wonderful! And I excuse myself from the table to go pay the check.

What do you do?

I don't have an answer, or I guess I don't think my answer is good enough. I play with my drink. I look at my feet—the buzzer from the laundry machine sounds through the plaster wall. I turn the light off above my head and head to bed.

\* \* \*

Today is the same. You do not know who I am and I read to you. I read. You put your head down. I read to you and you sleep. You snore. Water cracks in your throat. You snore. I keep reading to you though you hear nothing. You are asleep and loud in your sleep becoming the table with each exhale. Water cracks in your throat. Exhale—you whinney with horse lips. You laugh and sleep and I continue to read.

When you wake you see the book open in my hands and ask what are you reading? Could you read me a story? I'd love to hear a story.

I read again to you.

Today is the same.

Your head wilts. It bobs and eases down to the table slow like a tide going out, water coming up then falling back, but reaching further and further up the beach. The tide is out and quiet and your head is down. I watch this as I read to you and once your head is down and I hear the air escaping from your mouth I stop reading aloud. My throat gets tired after awhile anyway. I go on reading to myself, but you lift your head partially from the table.

Did you stop, you say.

Oh sorry I thought you were sleeping.

I am not sleeping. I am listening, you say.

Okay, I say and go back and start to read again, giving each word a voice as I glance up at you now and then to see if you are sleeping again.

I can not see your face but I can tell you are listening.

My throat is getting tired but my reading to you is like a spell that keeps your head down. When I stop—to cough or look out the window—the charm is broken. You wake.

Go on, I am listening, you say.

You do not like silence. Even when you sleep you talk. You make small talk in your sleep. Oh wonderful, yes I'm doing wonderfully. The range of your voice fluctuating in pleasant dips and climbs, up and down. I'm doing wonderfully, yes, welcome come in come in, like you are hosting a dinner party. A couple from town knock at the door, you welcome them in. Come in come in. The house was tidier then. The shelves were ordered and there were no milk crates stuffed with manilla folders and old coats stacked on the floor. The pictures hung straight on the walls. I can't imagine you get many guests now. But I'm sure back then, there were people over every weekend.

I can see you then, in your house, in a nice dress with your hair up, welcoming guests in. Come in come in and you hug the wife and shake hands with the husband and they come in come in. Their kids have already run around back to the yard to meet your

children. They run around the garden and between the apple trees with your children and you can see them, hear their shrill laughs as they chase each other, from the porch where you and your guests drink whiskey and soda and iced tea. There are crackers with cheese. Ice rattles off glasses. Your husband and the other husband stand at the railing. Your husband points out to the grass, then the driveway recently paved, then the slice between the trees where you can see the water. The other husband nods. You sit down with the wife and say I'm doing wonderfully, yes, and touch her arm and start to nod as you listen to her, speaking, going on about something, nodding and bobbing your head, smiling your lipstick on red and your hair pulled back under a band, tidy and blonde and you are listening. You smile and laugh. I can hear your laugh and you say

Go on, I'm listening.

I look up and you are smiling at me, nodding at me. Your hair falls in front of your face and with a wrinkled finger you pull the gray lock back behind your ear.

I say sorry and start to read again.

Can you go back maybe to the beginning of the page?

Ok.

I start to read and you laugh.

Slower—could you go a little slower? I'm so old it is hard to keep up...

I go slower and read louder—I go at a ridiculous pace and I feel like I'm shouting.

You mumble oh excellent, oh, this is great.

I read the story 'Eveline' by James Joyce. I tell you that Eveline sits at the window and watches as the evening invades her street. I tell you that she leans against the window curtains and inhales the odor of dusty cretonne. I go on, telling you Eveline was tired, watching people move along her street, hearing their footfalls as they moved along her street, oh, how her street has changed over the years—I am telling you all of this when you stop me and ask

What was that word?

What word?

The word you said before. You don't know?

I shake my head.

Here, start at the beginning and go slow.

I go back to the top. I tell you again—and let you know by my tone that I am doing this again—that Eveline sits at the window and watches as the evening invades her street and as she leans against the curtains she inhales the odor of dusty cretonne—

Yes. That one. You sound out the word: Cray-tone. So interesting. And what does it mean?

I shrug but you can not see me. You have propped your head up on your chin, but your eyes are closed, pressed together, in concentration.

I look back over the first lines. I have no idea what cretonne is.

Maybe it is something in the air, coming up from the street, I say.

You do not respond. You repeat the word.

Cray-tone, you say. Is it French?

I nod. That sounds right. Then say, Oui oui we might be French.

You laugh and the table shakes. Oh, you're wonderful.

I continue on with the story and I read it slow. You put your head down and start to breathe heavily. I think that you are probably asleep but I can not stop. You would wake if I stopped. I keep reading. There is an Irish word I can't pronounce, keogh, and I pretend it is not there. I don't want you stop me again. What was that word? Go back a bit...I've never heard such an interesting word before. I go on with the story. My voice is low. I go slow. I am tired sitting there in my chair. It is still morning and the sun is strong coming through the glass, hitting my face. I think I am Eveline at the window feeling tired. I want to lean against the window curtains, inhale the odor of dusty cray-tone, and hide my face from the sun.

It is a short story and towards the end, again, the story goes that Eveline sits at the window. Again, I tell you that Eveline is at the window and this time she is worried about time, about running out of time, and with her head against the curtains she inhales the odor of dusty cretonne and again, you stop me.

What was that word?

I do not respond. My voice hurts from reading out loud.

What was that word? Cray-tone?

Yes.

So interesting. Cray-tone. Do you know what it means?

No, I don't know.

It sounds French. Is it French?

I pause, then say, Oui oui we might be French.

You laugh and the table shakes. Oh, you're wonderful.

The story ends and I close the book.

\* \* \*

I glance at the clock on the wall. It is almost time to go.

I try to start getting you ready to go by 10:30 or so. It takes you a long time to get prepared to leave the house. Most days, it takes me fifteen minutes just to get your head up from the table, you'll be so tired from your nap, from sitting there, I guess. I'm up I'm up, you'll say, face down on the table, not getting up. I'm up I'm up, you'll say and then slip back into sleep.

Once I stood over you for 45 minutes saying your name again and again glancing at the clock watching the minutes fall away as I repeated your name softer and then sterner It's time to go trying to get you up again and again.

How did I get so tired? you asked the table, not getting up. You laughed and I was so stressed, trying to get you up as I watched the time fall away from us. I eventually gave up. I called your husband and told him that you were very tired and we couldn't go into town to get lunch. I was so embarrassed. My job consisted of taking an old lady to lunch and I couldn't even do that. I thought your husband would be upset but he wasn't. He just said ok, it's probably because we visited our grandchildren yesterday and you were still tired from that. I said ok, that makes sense. Then I said I was sorry and he said don't be sorry and that he'll be back at the house soon. I hung up the phone and looked at you sleeping there with your head on the table. I remember feeling very warm towards you in that moment, like we were very close.

But it is really time to go.

Do you want to start getting ready to go? I ask.

Oh, yes, you say. And where will we be going?

We are going to lunch.

Oh, excellent! you say but do not move.

Great, I say, standing up.

You laugh. Ok, well I'm just going to keep my head down for a couple more minutes and then we'll get ready to go...ok?

Ok, I say.

I am standing over you. I nod and push my chair in.

Ok, well I'll just go get the car ready and then when I come back, you can get up. Sound good?

You laugh. Sounds good!

I walk into the hallway where your walker is kept and carry it out to the car. You hate having to use the thing and you are always telling me that you don't need it anymore. The first week I was with you, I believed you. I told you I had to go get the walker before we went into town and you scrunched up your face and said no no, waving your hand at me, I haven't used that thing weeks! I shrugged and said ok. I did not know what our days looked like then. I did not know how you were. You are self-conscious about using it—the walker makes you feel helpless and I did not want you to feel helpless. I left the walker in the hallway and I walked you to the car. We drove into town. We parked and I helped you out of the car onto the sidewalk. It was not easy—your legs were wobbly, your weight would not settle on them. Your balance was bad. I worried that if I pulled too hard on your arm I would hurt you. You chuckled to yourself after you

were finally able to stand up. You took me by the arm and we shuffled our way down the sidewalk towards the cafe where we were having lunch. Your steps were small and I could feel your weight on my arm, how it would suddenly swing out and I'd grab your hand with mine, making sure you wouldn't fall. You were tired—still tired from the walk through your house to the car, from getting into the car and getting out. You were out of breath. You stopped me, telling me you had to sit down. There was a bench in the park at the end of the block. I said and you looked up the street to try and see it. It's there, I said. It's so close. You can get there. You bit your lip and looked down at your shoes. You kept on, taking more and more breaks and I held you tight so you wouldn't lose your balance and fall. You closed your eyes and breathed. It was warm and you unzipped your fleece. People walked by and glanced at us. You smiled weakly at them, chuckled airily, and I smiled too. People were looking at us. I said your name, told you we were close, we were almost there. We finally got to the bench. You reached out your hand and grabbed the iron arm rest, I eased you down and you fell into the seat. You released a heavy sigh. You chuckled and settled in. I watched your whole body sink into that chair. I dreaded making you get up again. We weren't even to the cafe yet. We still had to cross the park and you would have to walk the whole way. After lunch, I decided I'd leave you for a moment, run to the car, and bring it around so you wouldn't have to walk again. I told you this plan after we finished lunch. You said ok, your head already dropping to the table next to the

ketchup bottle and your cup of coffee. I ran as fast as I could back to the car, drove it around, and double-parked outside the cafe. I was nervous leaving you alone. I hurried back into the cafe and you were fine, talking to the waitress who was sitting down next to you.

We drove back to your house and I walked you inside, back up the hallway to the kitchen table. You sat down and your husband was there, he took me aside and told me that you needed the walker, that you shouldn't go anywhere without it and I nodded. I was hot with shame. I apologized and I ducked my head back into the kitchen to say bye to you but you were asleep.

After that I learned to put the walker in the back seat of the car when you were asleep on the table or in the bathroom, getting ready to go. Sometimes you would see it in the back seat and say something about how you hadn't used that thing in ages, but I learned to not respond and you'd forget about it. Sometimes I'd get out of the car after we've parked and you'd protest saying no no, I don't use that anymore! but I'd unfold it on the sidewalk anyway and, after helping you up onto your feet you would reach out your hand instinctively for balance, finding the handle of the walker. You'd start pushing it down the street and nothing more would be said about it.

I carry the walker out the front door and make sure it doesn't close behind me. It is cold outside but the chill is refreshing. It is different—a nice change from summer. I

load the walker into the back seat of my car and make sure everything is clear from the floor of the front passenger seat.

I linger for a moment in your front yard—the air is so much fresher than inside your home. Everything in there has that stagnant smell. It is an old person's home. The water in the harbor looks heavy today. Waves feathering in the wind. There are no boats out—I imagine many have been taken out and brought up onto land in preparation for winter.

A seagull glides through the clove in the trees towards your home. I watch it as it arcs over head—it will land on your balcony railing and pad around expecting to find some food. Your husband often lays out pieces of bread for it to eat but there are none out now. The bird will linger and you might wake to it, padding around in its clumsy orange boots. No one else around. The kitchen empty. Just you at the table and the bird at the window.

I go back inside and your head is still down.

I look and the seagull is there as I thought it would be. It's looking in through the glass, expecting bread. I watch it, not giving into it.

It blinks its black eye.

Such a handsome bird, you say behind me.

I laugh, if you say so.

I do say so. You smile. You don't?

I just think they're kind of annoying.

Oh. I didn't realize they were annoying. You chuckle to yourself.

I look back towards the bird. It paces up and down the railing then flies off. I turn around and your head is down on the table. I look at the clock. I will give you five more minutes.

\* \* \*

Put on your coat, I say.

You do not want to wear the coat—I can see that.

Here it is I am holding it open for you. Put it on, it is cold out.

You look past the coat to the chair at the end of the table piled with sweaters and fleeces. You shuffle over to the pile and with one hand you pick up each fleece by its scruff. You look it up and down. First the orange, then the green.

Oh these are wild, you say.

Those are too thin, I say. You're going to need a heavier coat. It is too cold for those. I gesture towards the window. The sky is overcast. A breeze howls and pulls some

leaves from the trees to prove my point, but you ignore me. You look at the powder blue fleece and settle on it.

Let's try this one, you say and I tell you again that it is too cold. You'll need to wear the heavier coat. Here I am holding it out for you, I can help you put it on.

Oh but that one is so black and so big, you say, shuffling back to your chair, the blue fleece hanging from your hand clenched at your hip. You use the table for balance. You lean heavily on the table.

You can carry that coat you got and if I need it I'll let you know, ok?

Your voice goes up and I can tell you are getting annoyed with me. You are saying I am not a child. You are saying I can figure out what I wear on my own.

I say ok, knowing exactly what will happen. I will open the front door and you'll feel the freeze in the air and the bite of the wind and say Jesus, it's freezing out and in the small entryway I'll have to work the heavy coat onto your shoulders, pull your arms through and get the damn thing over your shoulders.

You sit down and hand me the blue fleece. I tell you it'd be easier for me to help you if you were standing up.

You say, no it's okay we can get it while I sit, so I unzip the zipper and hold it open. You lean forward, stretching your right arm behind you, and your face touches the table as you make your fingers come together into a point like the head of a spade and

you dig for the sleeve. You miss the armhole. You miss it again, bending your arm back blindly, thinking you have it then pushing your hand down into the back of the chair. You huff and shift. The table moves. I take your wrist and lightly pull it back to help. I can feel the tension in your arm, it hums from your wrist to your shoulder. It feels like the wing of a small bird. I have your wrist and I think this is like putting a fleece on a chicken.

It'd be easier if you stood up—but as I say it, you find the sleeve and push your hand through.

There, you say with relief and triumph. You shift your weight and start on the other arm. It is the same. You do not find the sleeve any easier and I help again. Finally, it is on.

Alright, let's head out, I say and you sit up and work on the zipper. I watch you as you try to lock the ends together. They are too small, and your fingers are too swollen. You close your eyes and laugh.

Can you help me with this? And I say sure.

You stand up and I crouch, holding my breath. You smell like baby powder and stale wine—it is your perfume. You wear too much perfume. Before we head out, you grab the spray bottle there on the table, close your eyes and spritz your neck. The smell is

like a relative, forcing me in a bear-hug. Please don't, I say to myself as you go for your perfume and then you spray it, inhale it and go ahhh.

I quickly bring the zipper ends together and pull the zipper a quarter of the way. Alright, I got it started for you, I say.

You're wonderful.

You zip the zipper up to your throat and we head down the hallway. I walk in front of you with the coat and your purse. I stop at the three steps that lead down to the front door entryway and look back. You have your hand out sliding along the wall for balance.

Do you have my purse?

Yes.

Are my glasses in my purse?

Yes.

You stop and look at me. Your left hand is against the wall and your other arm crooks in at the elbow and its hand rests on your thigh. You do not use this hand for anything. It is no good.

Did you check?

Yes but I can check again.

I unzip the bag and make a show of looking through it. I see the glasses in their soft case.

Yes, they're in here.

You're wonderful, you say, sighing deeply.

I help you down the steps. The entryway is crowded with both of us in it. A large plastic plant with paper leaves pushes me into you. I have the purse and coat slung over my arm as I hold your elbow and open the front door. I use my back to keep the door open and the air comes in.

Jesus, it's freezing out, you say and you stop on the threshold. You look at the coat in my arms. I want to put that on.

I can't help but say I told you so. You act like you didn't hear me and turn around so I can pull your arms through and get the coat onto your shoulders.

Does it have a hood? you ask.

I nod, knowing that you can not see me. I turn you around and button the coat.

The coat is huge and hangs off your shoulders. You look like a football player with his heavy pads—the coat swallows your neck.

I open the door and take your hand to help you out. The wind picks up and you grip my hand tight and roll my knuckles. It feels much colder than when I was out before. I close the door and we cross the yard to my car sitting in the driveway.

Is that yours? you ask.

There she is, I say.

You move quickly because of the cold and you know you are not going far. I help you into the car. I open the door for you and you say oh, you're such a gentleman and I say just doing my job. I steady the door and try to block the wind coming up the hill from the water as you lift your foot up and into the front seat. You manage it, but get caught with your head ducked low so you won't bang your head. You laugh and huff, shifting the foot you have planted on the driveway, trying to figure out a way to get that leg to follow the other. I offer to take your other hand but you ignore it. You have one foot in and one foot out and your upper body is folded at your stomach to protect your head. You chirp in discomfort, your shoe scuffles against the loose gravel, and finally, you just fall into place.

Very smooth, I say.

You laugh, but you are exhausted. I place your purse between your feet and I grab the seat belt and reach over you to buckle you in. I hold my breath. I hear the click of the buckle and stand up.

Ok, I say. I close the door fast and get in behind the wheel. The car has lost all of its heat from the morning, but it is nice to be out of the wind. You are breathing heavily, I smile because your coat is bunched up around your head and I can barely see you except

for your nose and forehead and knotted tangle of hair. I turn on the car and the heater hums.

Ok, let's get going, I say and start to back out of the driveway. Johnny Cash's American V: A Hundred Highways, my only CD, plays from the speakers and you coo.

Oh, is this Johnny Cash? you ask.

Yes, I say. You ask me that every time you're in my car.

I love Johnny Cash, and you start to sing in a high, wavering voice.

You know all the words. They stay with you from day to day and you sing along as we drive into town.

## II.

## To the Lighthouse

The leaves are down. It is like the branches are receding into their trunks and the trunks are shrinking back into the ground. The trees are returning to their sapling days, back to their seeds and nothing.

Beyond that is the harbor and the town. We can see it better now that the leaves are down and the trees are shrinking.

You are sleeping and I am killing time by looking out the window and finding things with my eyes. There is the harbor. There is the town. It is a clear day. The crispness of fall had cleared away the haze and warping wet of summer in the air and now we look out the window and can see clearly through winter's cold.

There is the lighthouse.

I think oh, I'll read *To The Lighthouse* because of course, there is the lighthouse, out there past the town's neck, out at the end of a rocky island point, pushing its finger out into the ocean.

I go to the bookshelf in the hall and take the copy you have down—I know where it is, I have flipped through its pages before—and walk back to the kitchen.

I have never read Virginia Woolf before and I am excited because she is one of the best—everyone says—and it’s really embarrassing that I’ve gone this long without reading her. I decide I am going to love this book and sit down heavily with it in my hands. The small chair crackles and pops adjusting to my weight and you shift across the table from me. You mumble wet-lipped and laugh—you are always mumbling and laughing while you sleep.

You say something about a sweater.

Oh yes...the sweater...it’s lovely.

You start to snore. Loud, too. You put your back into it when you snore. I can’t help but laugh as the air clogs up your nose and you sputter like a lawn mower.

I open the book, pass over the foreword by Eudora Welty, and find the start of section one. It is called “The Window” and I think this is perfect, for I am reading next to a window and out beyond it is a lighthouse.

The book begins and Mrs. Ramsey speaks, saying something like yes, tomorrow we will go to the lighthouse. “But you’ll have to be up with the lark,” she says and her boy, James, is filled with excitement and anticipation for an adventure is promised. To the lighthouse! They’ll have to sail and it will take all day.

The book begins and the beginning goes on for some time—it is a long sentence. I find myself reading it fast because it is not stopping. The words roll on and roll on and

my body tenses, my spine straightens as they continue on. I feel a rope tighten across my shoulder blades. There is a flat pain across my forehead—my teeth are clenched and I don't know why—relax. I sit back, release the teeth, and exhale. I lift the book up from the table and hold it by either cover. If I pull hard and out I could split it like a wishbone. I want to do just that and I don't know why. Why am I grinding my teeth? I find this anger in me. It comes from somewhere inside of me and I do not know it or recognize it until it is nearly through my skin and jumping out of me. It makes me want to do things quick and violent: break a glass, pull a book apart. The snapping of its spine will snap mine, get it out of its rigidity, release its clench—relax.

I shudder as shiver passes through me like a breeze through branches. Relax.

I am in your life, deep in your home, and you are old and sick and dying and it is overwhelming. It is too much. Being here tightens me up. I don't know how to get through this, how to live a life, and do it good and beautiful. I look out the window and there is the ocean, deep and endless, and thinking about the years, the months, just the coming day even, feels like being dropped in the middle of that ocean out there.

I look at you and there is a whole life between us.

I get annoyed and angry at the smallest things.

You ask me questions—you've already asked me that before.

You sleep all the time—get up! You're tired all the time because you sleep all the time.

You say read to me—can't I just get a moment of peace? I want to be alone.

I am young and you are old. You dream about what you have already had in life and I can only imagine what might come.

My mind slips its mooring and floats away.

It is impossible that life ends. It is impossible that it winds down and stops. It is impossible that it is here and then it is gone.

Out the window, imagine the water sinking back, draining away, gone.

Maybe I am mad at you for that.

Maybe I am a little jealous of you for that.

I look at you and I am looking out at you, as if through a window, and there is no end to your breadth and depth. There is no end to your ever-changing skin.

“It's due west,” said the atheist Tansley and I do not know how I got here. I scan back the couple of pages I apparently read. He is talking about the lighthouse—the one James wants to go to and his mother, Mrs. Ramsey, says yes to, and on it goes. There is so much joy until James's father, Mr. Ramsey, says “But...” He says something like but a trip to the lighthouse won't be fine, and suddenly that joy in the boy becomes rage, murderous rage. Then Mrs. Ramsey, over her knitting, says “But...it may be fine” and her

thoughts go on about her knitting until Tansley the atheist says “It’s due west” and he’s talking about the lighthouse.

I remember how in the summer it was hot and you complained. I remember watching you push your walker up the sidewalk from the cafe to the car, stopping after every couple shuffled steps or so to sigh dramatically, hanging your tongue and rolling your eyes.

Did you purposely park this far? you asked

But of course, I said, looking back at you.

It is so hot out—

I know, we’re almost there.

I just wilt in the heat.

I know.

You stopped to squint up the street at the line of cars parked there.

Which one is yours?

It’s the red one.

You counted with your hand, one eye almost closed.

That one five away.

I looked and counted.

Yes.

Jesus, did you purposely park this far away?

It's not that far, I said.

I started on, swinging your purse as I moseyed on, looking back at you and straining my neck as if that would help pull you along, roll you along, and get you going faster. Cars drove by and their passengers stared at us. We must've been a strange sight—a young man and old woman bickering back and forth with one another as they shuffle up the sidewalk.

We finally got to the car. I steadied the door as you fell into the front seat. Very smooth I said. I checked the time and there was still some time to kill before your husband said to meet him back at the house. I suggested we go for a drive. As long as I don't have to get out of the car, you said. Okay, I said, smiling, and reached across you to roll down your window to get you some air. You sank into the chair, the chest strap of the seatbelt holding you up as your head drooped like a sunflower over your shoulder. Your eyes were closed. Your shoulders rose and fell as you tried to find your breath.

I followed the main road up the hill and out of town and decided to head towards the lighthouse. You could not see it from your kitchen window then because the trees were filled out with leaves, but I knew it was there. I had seen pictures of it and had got glimpses of it on drives. At that point in the summer, I had not been working for you

long—the town felt new and I still wanted to explore. I knew the direction the lighthouse was in and I figured it would not be hard to find if I just stuck to the coast.

As I drove, the wind blew your hair up, making it wild, but you did not seem to mind. I remember you laughing as you pulled a strand from your mouth. You were tired but you were happy, leaning with the curve in the road, just sitting.

A couple of turkeys crossed the road ahead of us and I slowed down to watch as the birds passed and disappeared into the brush.

Those are some ugly birds, I said.

You smiled and said, Yes but they're delicious.

I turned down a residential road that ended at a dirt lot, looking over a coved beach. This was a local spot. It was secluded. The beach in town was crowded with tourists while the sand in front of us was peppered with very few. Men and women sat back in chairs. Children dug in the sand and teased the water. A couple of dogs splashed in the foam and barked. From the end of the beach, a trail of rocks peppered out into the water, ending in a flat, circular slate topped with the lighthouse.

Eastern Point, you said, sitting up to see over the dashboard.

There it is, I said, thinking it was not all that exciting, but it was a pleasant day and it was nice to be outside. Out from us was nothing but blue water and blue sky. I remember it being so clear that day.

I think I learned to swim on this beach, you said.

Not a bad place to learn.

No not at all. You chuckled, sitting back into the seat. My father would walk me and my sister out, one in each arm, until the water was up to our feet and then he'd drop down and the water would jump to our stomachs and we'd scream! It was such a shock. We loved that. And then he'd drop us again and we'd scream again. Oh, he was wonderful. We'd say, again daddy again and he would. He'd dip us deeper and deeper with the water climbing up our chests, my sister and I screaming the whole way, giggling with excitement. Then, when the water was deep enough, he'd say Okay, get ready girls 'cause we're going down, and we'd take one big breath before we all dropped into the water together.

Your face was sharp looking out at the water. Color had spread across your face as you told that story. The skin around your eyes tightened and the crow's feet and pockmarks along your cheek seemed to clear away. You sighed and looked up at me and your face had changed. It was fuller, and younger maybe. I remember seeing something pass through your eyes: the skin of something dark, the wetback of some breaching animal. It broke through the water, turned the skin of it foamy white, then disappeared. It sounds strange but I'm sure I saw something there. It was in your eyes. It made you sharp and young—you were young again.

And then your face changed back to what I knew before. You became the old lady again. You closed your eyes and chuckled, sinking back into your seat, and I relaxed.

For a moment, I was dropped into something that had no end.

I looked at the clock. It was time to go.

Alright let's move on, I said, putting the car in reverse.

Yes, you said. I'm starving.

You're starving? We just ate!

We did?

You got a roast beef sandwich. Half of it is still in your bag.

You're kidding?

I shook my head, looking back over my shoulder.

You laughed: I guess I forget that I wasn't hungry anymore.

I guess so, I said, pulling onto the road back into town.

I close the book. I check the time and it is not quite time.

It feels like it's been winter forever though the first snow has yet to fall. The sky has stayed a bitter gray and the ocean there is the same color: granite, cold stone. It makes it hard to distinguish the distance from the window out past the trees and across the harbor—the lighthouse feels far away.

\* \* \*

I come in and sit down at the table and you are sleeping, mumbling in your sleep. You wake up and say, my goodness I'm tired isn't it awful how tired I am? and then again, your head drops down to the table.

Our days seem to blend together.

How do you sleep like that? your body bent and head on the hard table.

You ask me about where I am from, where I live now, what do you do? you ask and I can never seem to answer in a way that you'll remember. What do you do? What do you want to do? Idaho, Alaska. You show me a picture of your father—it's there, propped up and framed in front of you on the table—have I shown you this? you ask. Such a handsome man. I can see the resemblance, I say, handing back the picture and you take it and tell me that he was in the military and no-nonsense and when you'd say, I think so daddy as a little girl, he'd furrow his brow and say, you're not supposed to think, you're supposed to know. That makes you laugh now, thinking back on that now. How is it that it is that phrase that sticks? After all this time, you pick up the picture of him smiling in a field with an open shirt collar and a pipe proud in his mouth and he is young, too young for you to have known him like this, and there all these memories and photographs of your father but you come up with that line, the line: you're not supposed to think, you're

supposed to know. You're not supposed to think, you're supposed to know floods your memory when you see the picture there in front of you. You look at it and sink into it, letting the tide charge up the beach and cover you. Your father leans down over you as you look up at him, a child, full of uncertainty, or just fear, and you answer I think so daddy in a high, fragile voice, and he will have none of it, he furrows his brow and says you're not supposed to think and you know how the line goes—he's said it to you enough so that you know exactly what he'll say and how he'll respond and it's at the point where even when you do know what he'll say you can't help but say I think so daddy to him because that is your line. It is a reflex, it's comfortable. You say your line, even though it is not true—you do not think, you know—but to hear his line in his voice is comfortable. You're not supposed to think you're supposed to know, he says and you repeat that to me now whenever you look at the photograph in front of you.

You laugh. When I was a girl I'd say, I think so daddy and my father would always say, You're not supposed to think, you're supposed to know.

I smile, but I think it's a stupid saying. It is good to think, to admit that you don't know. It is okay to be unsure. It is okay, I tell myself.

But I admit, I often find myself saying I think when I actually know.

You ask where your husband is and I say, I think he went to run some errands in town.

You ask when he'll be home and I say, I think around one o'clock.

You chuckle and shake your head. Have I ever told you what my father would say to me when I was a girl?

Somehow that phrase has stayed with you, but now the roles have changed. You say his line while I say yours.

You are delicate, setting the photograph of your father on the table in front of you, correcting it if it is even slightly crooked. It must be facing you head on so that you can see it. You look at it for a moment before you lay your head down again.

\* \* \*

It is when you put your head down that I become comfortable here. I come in the morning, walk up the hall and sit down in my chair across from you. We say our hellos, we say our lines, and you eventually drop your head and sleep.

I sit still across from you.

I look out the window and watch the birds. I open a book to read, looking up occasionally when you make a sound, ignoring you if you say something nonsensical like I like your sweater when I am not wearing a sweater—you are just dreaming.

I am comfortable doing the same thing and saying the same thing each day, letting each day wash over us and through us, the weather being the only thing changing between us. You wake up and show me the photograph of your father and I say I can see the resemblance and you nod and you laugh. You tell me again the story of him saying you're not supposed to think, you're supposed to know and I nod along, not adding my own thoughts but just nodding along until you put your head down again so I can go back to sitting and reading and looking out the window. I sink back in my chair, cross one leg over another with a book open in my lap and look up at you occasionally, briefly. I look at you and you are not looking at me. You have sunk into the table, become another feature of the landscape. I look out at you and your skirt of hair fans out over the plastic dinner tray as it always does. There is your water glass. There are the unlit candles, the stacks of dishware, the stack of books. There are the two ceramic doves with their wings cocked behind their backs and there is the hump of your shoulder and there is the phone and the magazines and mail. I sit back and there you are. I know you like I know the objects on the table. Everything is in its place.

I look out the window and there is the harbor and there is the town and there is the lighthouse.

I am comfortable. I have my copy of Moby Dick open on my lap but I don't read it. I look out the window and the sky is graying, like a cloth soaking up water, becoming darker and heavier.

\* \* \*

Heavy knock on my door. I wake up to it—the heavy knock and a voice.

Get up kid. Come on.

The voice is low and harsh and I am up at it, pulling on the pants I had draped over the back of my desk chair. I know who it is—only one person ever knocks at my door. I open the door and Gus stands there in his Carhartt jacket, stamping his boots like a horse, hiding a cigarette in his hand. He's the groundskeeper for the property I live on. I live rent-free if I help him with yard work and other random jobs around the place. I do chores. Mindless tasks like changing light bulbs and raking leaves. I work with my hands. I don't make money but I earn my keep. I like that balance and simplicity.

And there is Gus at the door, kicking the caked snow off his boots.

Get dressed kid, he says, throwing a red thumb over his shoulder as if to say hop to it let's get going don't you know snow is coming down. He doesn't wait for me. He stomps back out the door into the cold. I glance out my window and it's true, snow is

coming down and by the looks of the half-buried window it has been coming down for some time now. I rush to get dressed. I grab my coat and hat and gloves and go out in it.

The woods are white and covered. Nothing is out there beyond the house but snow. None of the brush and thicket, the fallen logs and sitting rocks—all of it is snow and even the trees and their branches are clothed in the soft, sticking white. I stand there and watch the snow fall and it is like the flat gray of the sky is crumbling into pieces and reforming on the ground. I stand there and there is no sound. Winter is quiet. I trudge around to the front of the house where Gus sits in the front seat of the steaming truck, idling at the end of the driveway with a yellow plough fixed to its front fender.

Grab a shovel, he says and there's his big red thumb going over his shoulder again to the truck bed. He breathes out smoke and it is so cold that it is like he is exhaling a cloud from his lungs. Dig out the front door and the driveway while I plough the long driveway and once that's done we'll salt it down so it won't build up again.

Sounds good, I say and grab a shovel.

He drives up the road and lowers the plough at the mouth of the long driveway that winds up the hill to the main house and barn. The truck is in low gear. It is loud and harsh as he inches forward and the plough grinds against the gravel of the driveway. The sound is like his voice, his throat grinding up against each word as it comes out of his mouth. I'm part Polish, part Irish and part alleycat! he always says. Kid, I'm a fucking

stray! he always says, and I nod and laugh when he says that not knowing really what to do or say. I just smile and nod and try to stay out of his way.

I drop the shovel down into the snow at the end of the driveway and lift. The snow is light and breaks away in big pieces. I toss the load to the side and continue on. I work quick and the progress is quick and evident. It feels good to work hard before I've had coffee or breakfast. It's a refreshing way to wake up—it involves the body and feels instinctual. I don't even know the time, but it must be early. I just drop the shovel into the snow and toss it to the side. Legs spread and feet planted, I dig forwards, further in, until I have cleared out the front path to the front door. I salt the walkway and then go to the tenants' cars parked to the side and brush off the snow from the hoods and windshields and tops of their cars. I stand their wipers up if they had forgotten. I look back towards the house with its four stories, weary that someone will think I'm messing with their car. It is a strange home, a white rectangle built into a hill so the top floor is level with the top of the hill and the basement floor is level with the bottom of it. I have to lean back against a car to see its roof. The sky powders my face—I squint into it. I imagine someone in each of the wide-eyed windows, transfixed by the view. What else is there to do but put your chin in your hand and watch the outside swirl and move beyond the glass? Nothing else to do but be still and warm and watch as snow falls, making this world strange.

I look over to the neighbor's property and he is shoveling his driveway. I wave but he doesn't wave back. His head is down on the work at hand.

And what do you do on these snowy days?

The same things you do on any other day, I suppose. You sit in your chair at the kitchen table. You eat. You sleep. But it is different because I am not there. Your husband has not gone to run errands, he stays at home and is there with you and I am not there. You do not know that I am not there and you do not know that this snow day is any different than any other day. For you, this different day is a normal day, a day that has been normal for years. You look around and you are in your kitchen in the house you grew up in and your husband is there next to you reading the paper, or you can hear him below tinkering in the garage, or padding around the other room. Everything is as it always is and was. Nothing is different. Here is your life. You look up from a nap and your husband is rubbing your back absentmindedly as he watches the news. What's the word? you ask and he says same ol' same ol'. No news. Outside, snow falls. The stone wall is covered by a white swell. You watch as someone shovels out your driveway. You think it's your son and say something about how you think he should come inside for some tea to warm up and your husband says no that's the neighbor's boy, he shovels out

all the driveways on the block. Well invite him in to warm up anyway, you say, lowering your head to the table, it must be freezing out.

I look down and snow is already starting to cover the driveway I just shovelled. The ground I uncovered is already white and gone and I tell myself that it is okay, you knew that would happen, it is okay. I tell myself that it's good that I cleared some of the snow away now so it wouldn't get out of hand and make the work ten times worse later. I walk up the driveway, leaving footprints, and the snow continues to fall and it is beautiful but I can't help but wish it'd stop—I did all this work and I want there to be proof, at least for a little while longer, I want to see proof of the work I put in. Here is the driveway I shoveled, but no—it is gone now.

I walk up the road with my shovel and turn up the long driveway towards the barn. The gravel is ploughed, the snow is flattened and packed hard so I can walk it easily. There are tire tracks and the lateral marks of a trough—I follow them up to the opened barn where the truck sits parked outside of it, still steaming and running idle, as Gus shovels a mixture of salt and dirt into a white laundry detergent bucket.

The fuck took ya so long kid? but he winks, his cigarette bobs. I trade the snow shovel for a spade and start to fill another bucket. We load them onto the bed, the tailgate

is down and the buckets are heavy. I'm starting to feel the cold in my feet. Snow has melted through to my socks.

Gus wants to salt the long driveway fast, he wants to get rid of some of the snow now so it's not so bad later. This driveway is a bitch, he says.

He tells me to sit on the tailgate and spread the salt as he drives down. He'll go slow, he says, give the salt a good heave, and he shows me how by tilting the bucket with one hand and with the other he swipes out from the bucket in a wide swing that sends a spray of salt and dirt over the ground. Really heave it out there, he says, and I nod and say I got it. I sit up on the tailgate with my feet dangling off and situate the bucket so it is propped next to me. Gus shouts out the window that he's going and the truck rocks into movement. I feel myself slide a little and grab on.

Spread it kid! Come on! he shouts and the road starts to move below my feet. I get to work, swinging my arm out, sending the salt and dirt across the road in boughed arcs that pepper across the packed snow. Faster kid! And I try to pick up my pace but it is hard holding the bucket because it is heavy with packed wet sand and salt and my arm is already tired from the rapid succession of throwing my arm out over and over again. I can feel the ache in my elbow and my gloves are already soaked through. My fingers are cold and I keep going, but it is slow and hard to spread the salt out along the driveway in any substantial way. The snow keeps coming down. Go slower, I shout, but Gus does not hear

and soon we are at the bottom of the driveway. Come on kid, he shouts and gets out of the car to show me again how he wants it done. Fast, he says. Really fast, and he is frustrated, I can tell, damn kid, and the smoke from his cigarette blows up into his eye, making it squint, and I nod, I got it but go a little slower, I say and he says nothing to that, getting back into the cab. The truck jumps forward again, this time up the driveway. I am faster now and my arm is more numb to the movement and the pain it causes. I sow the salt and dirt, spread it out over the snow. The cold granules scrape my fingertips through my glove. I dig deeper into the bucket as I throw out more and more and eventually there is none left. Done, I shout, holding up the bucket. Gus stops and I put the empty bucket behind me and slide up the full one, taking a moment to secure myself on the tailgate and position the bucket so that I can get to the dirt easily and quickly. Gus starts to drive. I'm not ready, I shout and he shouts Jesus Christ kid! And the snow is still falling and it seems to be falling heavier now and I can't imagine that what we're doing now will make much of a difference. I look back and can barely see the dark brown freckles of dirt I just sent out across the snow. Okay, I shout and we start to move again. We get to the top of the driveway and halfway back down again before the second bucket runs out. Done, I shout and Gus stops the car. I drop down from the tailgate and go up to the cab. His elbow hangs from the window and he swears to himself.

Snow's not letting up. This doesn't fucking matter.

I nod and he lets out one more fuck.

Get in the back and I'll drive ya down.

I hop back onto the tailgate and he drives on down the hill to the main road. He's going faster now and I can tell he's frustrated. I'm cold and tired and happy to be done. The woods on either side of the road are covered—I had never seen it like this before. The snow blankets and shrouds, it rounds the features off, dulling the landscape. This first snow is deep and stark and it is so inviting I forget the cold, forget the frustration, because here is this blank and simple beauty: the swell of the snow between dark trees.

I get off the truck and Gus drives away. The snow has covered the driveway and there is no evidence of the shovelling I did before. Soon I'll have to shovel it again. I stand there for a moment and the snow lands on my open glove. Flakes collect on my sleeve and do not melt. If I walked out into the woods and stood in one spot and did not move I would eventually be covered and not be seen until spring, until that first warm day, that first warm rain. I take off my gloves and go around the house to the basement door. I kick off the snow caked to my boots and step inside. The laundry machine is running, inviting me into the basement.

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In the morning, I wake and it has snowed even more during the night. The window in my room is nearly covered. I walk out to my car and it is hidden by snow and the driveway is unshoveled. It is going to take longer than I expected to get on the road. I'm not going to make it to your house in time. A wind picks up and it is bitterly cold. I swear into my coat collar. The snow around me winks with ice. I clear off the windshield, the mirrors, the windows, and the hood, then start to dig my way out working towards the road. The driveway is long and the snow is heavier today. The top of it is frozen, giving it a crust. I dip my knees and shove the shovel into the packed snow and lift a load into the planter between our driveway and the neighbor's. I lift and heave and feel the strain on my back. I am sore from yesterday. I have to pick away at the snow and break it into chunks to heave off to the side. I try to dig two tracks for my wheels to follow so I don't have to clear off the whole path. I go back to the car and start it—the engine turns slowly because of the cold. I put it in reverse and press the gas but the tires spin out. I try again but the car does not budge. I can smell rubber. I keep the car running and dig the wheels out more. I bend down and I see the patches of ice and I think well maybe more snow would help it gain traction. I pack snow under the wheels and try again. The car moves but not far, and it rolls back into its original divot. I swear again. I put the car in neutral and try and rock it free but of course that does not work. My feet slip. I can't get firm enough footing. I have to clear more snow away. I grab the shovel and work fast. Shovel

after shovel into the planter, I don't bother to lift with my knees, I slip again, dumping snow into the planter between our driveway and the neighbor's. I hear someone's voice as I work. Someone says, hey you better! and I stop my digging to look up and it's the neighbor—I've seen her around but never spoken to her. She's sticking her head out of her second floor window, talking to me. Better not, she says, and I look up at her and it takes a beat for me to understand that what she is saying is better not be putting snow into her driveway. You do that and I'll tell my husband, she threatens. I look at her and nod. She nods and I say ok. She closes her window and I start to shovel again, shaking my head, swearing into my coat collar jesus christ goddamn lady—I wish I had said that to her—jesus christ goddamn lady and it is so cold and I'm going to be late to get to your house. I clear the path and try to reverse the car again. The tires churn and I push down on the gas, saying come on dammit and the tires churn and spit black snow and I smell rubber and I throw my weight against the back of my chair to try and get the car to move and because I'm so completely angry and frustrated and I swear loud and into the steering wheel as I let go of the gas and feel this anger rise up in me and I want to hit something I do I grind my teeth and clench my fist and I want to hit something to help release this heat in me and I'm so mad and I sit up against the steering wheel press myself against it and punch the windshield.

I open my mouth, unclench my jaw. My face is hot.

I punched the windshield and there is a crack, with a chambered center where my knuckle hit, stretching across the glass. I look at it and swear. I am so embarrassed. I do not believe it, how could I have let that happen? I look back and the crack is still there, lengthening across my eyeline. I take a deep breath, the heat in my face dissipating, and I remember the bucket of salt kept by the basement door that's been there this whole time, that is always there. I go get it, swearing at myself, and I spread salt beneath the wheels and try again and the tread of the tires grip—I can hear the grind and crunch—and the car starts to move. It rolls down the snowy driveway and out onto the road. I swear at myself—I am going to be late as I wind through the neighborhood. I speed up the highway towards your house. The sky is cloudless and blue. I try to see past the crack across my windshield and focus on the road and how the trees along the road are white like bones with the snow, but I can't help it. The crack stretches out across my eye-line. It is getting longer, I think, and there is nothing I can do to fix it now. It is there now, lengthening across my windshield, and I am so embarrassed and frustrated. I charge up the highway towards your house wishing I didn't have to be anywhere, or do anything, thinking this day has already been lost.

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I knock on the door. I sing my hello. I walk up the long hallway and you are there

Oh hello, I did not know you were coming.

Here I am, I say.

Yes, you say. There you are. I'm just going to put my head down, and you do. You use your chin to move the dinner tray closer to you. Water spills from your glass. You lay your cheek onto the tray like one lays a steak on a pan. Some strands of hair fall quiet and slow. They are in no rush to catch up with the rest of your head, lagging behind like a fishing line following a lure into water. I watch these hairs fall. They cast out from the blue line of skin at the top of your hand and find themselves, without a splash, in your water glass.

Today's water is yesterday's.

I see lint floating about on its surface.

You have your head down and your eyes are closed, but I can tell you are restless today. You are not still and have not settled into sleep. You chirp and flinch and chuckle in your way that means you are uncomfortable. I take my copy of Moby Dick out of my backpack, hoping that you will eventually sink into a solid sleep.

I open the book and there is the first line.

Under your breath you say I'd love some coffee. I'd love a nice, hot cup of coffee.

You suck in and you exhale and you lift your head. Your eyes point at me. Your pupils are so small like the tip of a pen.

You say I could really go for a cup of coffee.

Yes. Coffee sounds good right now.

Doesn't it? I could murder a cup.

I smile but say nothing. I look back down at the book in front of me. I am not reading, I just don't want to make you coffee. That is what you are getting at—I know because you've done this before—you want me to make you some but I don't want to. I'd have to get up, dig around for a kettle. I'd have to turn on the stove. I'd have to find the jar of instant coffee mix and wash off a spoon. I don't know where anything is in this kitchen. It's disorganized. You would want sugar. I do not want to give you sugar. You take sugar in your coffee, or take coffee with your sugar. You take too much sugar. I am supposed to try and curb your sugar intake. That's what your husband told me to do. I told you that once and you looked at me in disgust: I don't give a damn what my husband says!

I have made coffee for you before and you made a big show of putting spoon after spoon of sugar into the cup. I said, you probably shouldn't put that much sugar in your coffee and you giggled, you were so happy I had said that. You winked, tongue out, watching the spoon go to the cup, and said oh, I think I'll be just fine.

Sugar is not good for you, I said.

Oh really? I had no idea! You laughed at that. My father always said sugar would give you pinworms.

What is a pinworm? I asked.

I don't know, and you ladled more sugar into your cup.

You say again I'd love some coffee. You gesture vaguely over your shoulder, there should be some somewhere.

I don't think your husband wants us to use the stove, and I hear how lame this sounds as I say it.

You snort: I don't give a damn what my husband says! I can do whatever I want in this kitchen. Where the hell does he get off telling me what to do in my kitchen?

I take a breath and pause. I want to say great then, make your own damn cup of coffee! I don't know where anything is anyway. Just get up and do it yourself, it's not that hard. Just do something about it!

But I pause. I compromise and say that we can get coffee at lunch. When we head into town we can get a cup at the cafe.

I don't want a cup of coffee then, I want a cup of coffee now. Why is so hard to get a cup of coffee in my own kitchen?

I ignore you. You are right, of course. It shouldn't be this hard, but I ignore you and look down at my book. Call me Ishmael. The moment will pass. I feel you looking at me but the moment will pass. These types of things tend to go away with you if I just let it sit. Let it sit and don't stir the pot. You will probably forget what we were arguing about. We were not really arguing—just leaving a lot of things unsaid. I look up from my book and you are looking at me and I can tell that this is not just going away. When you are upset, you are focused. A strong emotion lingers right at the surface, refusing to sink away. I look at you and you are sharp. The skin around your eyes are tighter as if you had put on a mask. There is something in your eyes that is not leaving. I feel like a boy who has talked-back to his mother. I sit up and close my book and say that I can look around for some coffee.

Oh wonderful, you say in a friendlier tone, but not without snark. I get up and walk to the faucet. I fill up the quick boil, then grab one of your mugs from the table.

Make sure it's strong. I want it tough.

I take a deep breath.

Put some hair on your chest, I say and you laugh. Your head is down again and you laugh into the table.

I spoon the instant coffee grounds into the mug as the water starts to boil. I pour the water in and the bowl of the mug fills with steam and the flat black coffee rises in it. I

put the mug down in front of you, the steam rising into your face, and you say oh my, you're hired.

I go back to my chair and I see by the way you bring your lips down to the cup, not wanting to lift it but dropping your head down for your lips to meet the cup, that everything is back to how it was and usually is. I relax but feel annoyed. I am annoyed at you as you sip the coffee and go ah, now that's nice. You smack your lips and wink. But it needs a little sugar, you say.

I don't know where the sugar is.

That's ok. I got it here.

There is a jar with a small spoon on the table and you lift its lid and bring the spoon to the cup. You do this three times and then take a sip.

A little more, I think, and you go for two more spoonfuls. You know, my father used to say that sugar would give you pinworms. What's a pinworm? I still have no idea.

You are just talking to yourself. I sit there and refuse to respond—you are just talking to yourself.

You lean forward and take a loud sip. Just right, you say.

You take three more sips then slide the cup to top of your dinner tray. You lower your head and settle in there and I watch as some strands of hair fall into your coffee. You do not notice and I do not say anything.

\* \* \*

You write notes to yourself. Like leaves, they curl at their corners and are brittle when I pick them up from the table and read them.

Your hair is in your breakfast. Breakfast is not for sleeping thru.

You write letters to yourself. Letters from You then to You now. I find them on yellow sticky notes, on the backs of catalogues, scraps of notebook paper, junk mail, opened envelopes all scattered about the kitchen table. Some are older, the handwriting is slanted, in cursive.

Doctor's Appointment. Thursday 10:30

Or,

More fruit. Less sugar and cheese. Can not eat protein. Soup ok.

On most of them, the writing is shaky and disproportionate. The letters start out large and become cramped and fall away as they run off room and meet the end of the paper. They are hard to read. You can barely read them too. You pick up a scrap of paper and squint at it. You hold it in front of you and smirk, then hand it to me.

What does this say?

I take it and make it out. It says: Twin-lighted, stapled to rock.

You repeat it to yourself. Twin-lighted, stapled to rock.

I think that's your poem, I say.

My poem?

Yes. That's what you had told me before.

You laugh and your eyes are small and bright.

My poem. You shrug. I guess I'll take your word for it.

It's a good line.

Oh, well thank you. I think it's about the town, you say gesturing out the window.

There are the two steeples that stick up from the cluster of the village: one for the congregational church and the other for the unitarian church. The water turns white as it breaks against the rocky neck below these steeples—we can see them from your window because it is winter and the leaves on the trees are down.

I think I have lived here my whole life, you say.

Yes, I think that's true.

You put your head down and I place the note back on your side of the table so you will find it again.

Later, you lift your head and look out the window. The sun reflects off the layer of snow covering the yard and you squint out through the glass. You turn to me and smirk like you did before and say, Twin-lighted, stapled to rock...

I nod and you kind of shrug and say, It's a poem I wrote, I think, a long time ago.

It's a good line, I say.

It is about the town, and you gesture out the window, but I do not look. I think I have lived here my whole life, you say.

Unless you move somewhere else, I point out.

You like the thought. Oh yes, that would be something. You smile and think for a moment: I could move to Paris.

Oui oui, I say and you coo warmly as you close your eyes.

Or maybe Alaska? I say.

I don't know what made that come to mind but it makes you chuckle.

I do love the cold.

Alright pack your bags then. Alaska it is.

Oh you're a riot. You're too much, you say.

You shake your head, Alaska, you repeat, low and into the table and I imagine you there. I have never been to Alaska so the town I put you in is not unlike your town here with its cramped roads congested by accumulated snow. I see you there in your black coat, lumbering up the road. You are all shoulders amongst the snow drifts and piles. There is no face to you. People follow you from their warmth, breath flowering the window panes in front of them. You come in from the wild like a bear and they say look who's come to town.

And I am there too. I can not see you without being there. I follow you, lagging behind like I'm your cub. People watch us and they say look who's come to town.

I find a note and it says you were married forty years ago today.

\* \* \*

You ask me to tell you about myself. I don't want to. I don't know what to say.

Tell you about myself?

You roll your eyes: Of course! Where are you from?

I am from California.

Goodness, and you make a show of slumping your shoulders. California sure is a big place.

Yes it is. I grew up in San Diego.

And pretend I know nothing about San Diego—where is San Diego in California?

Southern California. As far south as you can go before you're in Mexico.

So interesting. What was that like? You sit up to explain. See I'm a New Englander and Southern California and Mexico all sound very far off and exotic to someone like me.

Yes. It is very different than here. I gesture out the window at the panorama of whites and blues and grays. It doesn't snow in San Diego.

No snow really?

Really.

Oh my, I don't know if I could do that! You touch your chest and say proudly that you are a cold weather girl.

Yes, I know. You wilt in the heat.

You laugh, eyes closed. Have I said that before?

Yes.

I think I met my husband in the cold. We were skiing. He was a city boy and I was a country girl. Yes...we were skiing, in New Hampshire or Vermont, I think.

Yes.

I love the snow. You look out the window. I'm a cold-weather girl.

Yes.

I wilt in the heat. Have I said that before?

Yes.

And what about you? Do you like the snow?

Yes, but then I think about it. I like days when it snows but I don't like living in the snow so much. If it's really cold it can be tough.

You nod and I can tell that you like the elaboration and nuance of my previous statement.

You have to be tough on the cold. Can't let it be the boss. If it's tough on you, then you have to be tough right back.

I suppose that's one way to do it. I guess I'm not New England tough.

You sit up. No?

No.

What kind of tough are you then?

I shrug.

I-da-ho...you chuckle. I suppose it's a strange question: what kind of tough are you?

Your head drops a little and you close your eyes. There is a pause while you take a breath and sigh.

And where are you from? I'm sure you've told me this before...

I'm from California.

And does it get cold in California like it does here?

In some parts of California it does, but the part I'm from it doesn't. It was always very warm. Always seventy degrees and sunny.

Sounds like vacation! But how on earth did you get out here?

To Massachusetts?

Yes, and you start high with your yes and slide down it, each s a drop in tone as you hold it out. Yessss...you say.

I drove my car.

Well that's quite a trip.

Yeah, it took awhile.

Was it for school?

No. I just decided to move out here.

Oh my goodness! Just like that? You lift up your hand and give it a flick like your dusting a shelf. Just like that, you move?

Well, not just like that.

You nod for me to go on.

No, I thought about it for awhile.

And what made you choose to move here? You tap the table with the ends of your fingers. What made you choose here out of all the places in the country?

I don't know.

You laugh. Your eyes are on me, narrowed. You shrug and your voice goes high.

I don't know, you say and laugh again.

Yeah, I don't know.

I-da-ho, Alaska, you say and laugh again.

I just wanted to move, I say.

You nod and wipe your nose with your finger. You close your eyes. You're thinking.

I've never moved. I've lived in this house my whole life, you say.

I know, I say.

You laugh: Have I said that before?

\* \* \*

First it is the comb.

I hand you the comb. Unzip the purse and find it, I hand you the comb.

You're wonderful, you say, taking it in your hand. You cock your head so your hair falls over your right shoulder and you bring the teeth in. It bites your hair, I hear some strands snap. Knots snag the comb and you let out an oomf, pull the comb back and try again until the comb breaks through. I have seen you take the handle with both hands against a burly twine of your hair.

After you finish with your hair, you clean the comb's teeth. You floss a tangled nest of silver hair from between its prongs and let the mess fall from your hand. The hair

catches the light as it falls from your hand—a brief leaf in slow descent. It misses the trash can and the hair goes to the floor, disappearing in the rug.

You hand the comb back to me and I put it back in your purse.

We move on to the lipstick.

I hand you the lipstick before you even ask for it—I know it comes after the comb and you take it and your eyes are wide and smiling at me, how wonderful it is that I know what comes next. You're hired, you say taking the lipstick. It is hard for you to uncap the tube—your hand gives you trouble often, it is hard to grip such a small thing. I offer to help but you say no, no and put the tube in your mouth. You bite it and pull with your teeth and the cap does not give and I grimace looking at you, your face pinched and lopsided as you sink your teeth into the plastic tube and pull until finally the cap pops off. Your body jumps back from the release, then you chuckle as you spit the cap out into your open hand. You apply the lipstick to your lips.

I'm pretty old fashioned, you say.

Oh?

Oh yes, I don't go out without putting this stuff on.

Oh, I see.

Do the girls now use lipstick?

I think they still do.

Really? You say, finishing up and capping the tube. Well I don't go anywhere without putting it on.

I hand you a napkin and you round your lips and mouth it, leaving a red mark.

Ok, ready to get going? I ask, opening the purse for you to drop the lipstick in.

Almost, you say and you stand up. I must visit the ladies' room.

Sounds good. You hit the head and then we'll head out.

You laugh at this and repeat hit the head and head out under your breath as you shuffle out of the room. You love that pun, I think it reminds you that your husband would take you sailing when you were dating. Your children learned to sail in the town harbor. Your summers would be spent at the yacht club, attending events, sitting out on the deck watching the boats go out. Old friends of yours we'd run into while in town would often lean over to me and say watch out for her, wagging their finger at you, she was infamous for the parties she'd throw back in the day.

Wild times with this one, they laugh and you shake your head, smiling.

I suppose I was a little wild back then. But I've settled down, and you wink at me.

You close the door to the bathroom and I pick up your heavy winter coat. I hold onto the purse and throw the jacket over my arm. I stand in your kitchen and wait. I look out the window and it is a flat winter's day. I check the time and we'll be fine. Normally, I try to leave earlier so we can get a little bit of a walk in but it is too cold out and the

parking is a little tougher because there are snowbanks lining the sidewalk, piling onto the road. The streets are so small in town that any snow chokes the flow of traffic, reducing two lanes to one and pushing people out into the streets.

We won't walk far and you'll be happy about that. You'll say park as close as you can to the restaurant, I don't feel like walking today, and I'll say okay and that will be the end of it. I look at my hands and make sure I have everything you need while I wait: I have your bag and coat, I have my backpack and I pat my pockets, yes, I got my car keys and wallet. I have already put the walker in the back seat of my car. Even if you aren't walking far it is good for you to use it.

I hear the flush of the toilet and the faucet run. You open the door and I meet you there at the end of the hall with your winter coat open for you to put on. You look at it and then look past me to try and see the chair with your other coats on it. I say it is very, very cold out, giving the coat a little flick to get your attention back to it. You nod and turn so I can work your arms through and over your shoulders. It is easier because you are standing.

Does this have a hood? you ask.

Yes.

Excellent, you say and we start down the hallway to the front door.

Outside, it is bitter and cold. I help you out the front door and you shudder in the wind.

Does this coat have a hood? you ask as I take your hand. I throw it up over your head for you. It drops over your face and you laugh, lifting it up with your hand.

A walkway is dugout in the snow for us so we can get to my car in the driveway. We walk slow, taking small steps so as not to slip. You grip my hand hard.

Is that your car?

There she is.

I have to step into the snow to open the door for you. Snow gets into my shoes. You grip the door and lift your foot into the car. The coat is so bulky on you and the hood slips again over your eyes. I hold the door still as you negotiate your way into your seat, falling into place.

Very smooth, I say and place the purse at your feet. I reach over you and buckle you up and you are already tired. Your eyes are closed and head is back. Your lips are pinched tight as you breathe through your nose.

Ok, I say and close the door. I hurry around and get into the car. I start it and the vents on the dashboard growl. The heat will kick in soon, I say rubbing my hands together. I look over to you and you are still slumped in your chair, the coat and hood swallowing you, and your eyes are narrowed, going over something.

What happened there? you ask, pointing to the windshield. I had forgotten about the crack. I look at it and remember and my face gets hot. I turn away from you and put the car in reverse.

It's nothing I say, quickly. I didn't want to talk about it.

Is it ok?

It's just a crack.

I look over my shoulder and start to back up. The tires spin for a moment before the treads grip and we start to back out of the driveway.

But what happened? you ask. I look over and I can see you're not taking your eyes off the crack. You're still slumped in your chair and it looks like you're afraid, cowering from the glass. Johnny Cash starts to sing but you don't notice. You normally ask me if this is Johnny Cash, but you don't because you're eyes are stuck on the crack. You can't forget it.

A rock hit it, I say.

I don't look over at you. I want you to drop it but you don't.

What happened? you ask again and I say a rock hit it.

Has it always been there?

No, I say, but it's fine.

You do not believe me and we drive into town.

## III.

## Birds of Massachusetts

Your neighbor works in her flower bed. On her knees, on the other side of the low stone wall—I see the spade in her gloved hand as she lifts it up and drives it down. Her dog trots around her, sniffing the tree trunks, sitting briefly before getting up again and nosing about in a bush. I can see its tongue, the white of its stomach, the white of its tail, hair hanging long and the neighbor drives the spade down.

I rest my elbow on the table and watch her with no particular interest other than that she is out there and I can see her and watch her without being watched. The sun paints the window glass. Its heat palms my face and the neighbor drives the spade down. She is bringing up weeds and old root and turning the soil—finally winter is over. It has taken most of the spring with it but the cold is gone now.

Outside the window are birds. Lint breasted sparrows scurry in the hedge, burrowing about in its twig. They flit from the hedge to the feeder hanging from the porch. They take a seed, then arc back to the hedge. They throw a feather-fit in the stone water of the bath, ruffling their feathers up, puffing out their dusty breasts. They fall to

the grass. I lose them there, in the tall grass, moving about with their beaks down looking for grub.

Out in the orchard behind the garden, crows stalk. Four of them loiter like construction workers. I look to you and you are sleeping and I smile at the thought of shouting out, screaming, there's a murder in the garden! You would wake quick and get up quick forgetting your legs are bad, and you'd be razzled and young with your cheek still flat and pressed from the table and you'd go to the window and go where? what? how? not understanding and I'd smirk. I'd be all coy over here in my chair and clarify: a murder of crows.

You would love that. You would shake your head, going back to your chair, and repeat a murder of crows under your breath, sitting down and laughing, a murder of crows.

The neighbor's dog crosses over the wall into your yard. It starts to run and bark as if it's chasing something and the neighbor stands up and calls out its name. The dog continues on. The neighbor drops her shovel and steps over the stone wall into your yard, calling out the dog's name, clapping and slapping her thigh, calling out its name. The dog runs to below the kitchen window, right under us. I lean forward in my chair so to see the dog sniffing the hedge there. The bush shivers with small birds. The neighbor walks up and grabs the dog by the collar. She mutters something, something like dang dog, don't

you know your own name when its called, dang dog. The dog hangs its tongue and whines and she yanks it back. The dog yelps, then bounds back across the yard. The neighbor glances up towards us in the kitchen window and waves. I sit up, surprised, and look over to you. You are asleep, so I hold up my hand and wave in your stead. I feel strange doing so.

I think about how that morning the garage door opened below us as your husband headed out to run some errands. You sat up at the sound of the garage door and looked to the window. You grabbed the edge of the table and scooted yourself in the chair towards the window so you could better see the driveway as your husband inched the car out of the garage. I watched too. This is how an old man backs out of his garage: the car inches out and the brake lights flicker, hold, flicker and hold. Finally, the slow crank of the wheel, turning up the driveway.

You sat up in your chair as the long stroke of the Oldsmobile pulled out onto the road. Your husband stuck his arm out of the window and started to wave. He waved with his whole arm, up and down, and you stood up and waved too. You planted one hand on the table for balance and you leaned forward and waved to him.

Can he see me? you asked.

Yes, I said, he knows you are here, that's why he's waving.

You continued to wave, still standing—your hand back and forth at the wrist. He waved too. His arm moved like a gull's wing.

Can he see me?

I said again: He knows you are waving.

You watched him all the way down the end of your street, to the inevitable left when he pulled his arm in and the car turned out of sight. You then lowered yourself into your chair, closing your eyes and biting your bottom lip. You put your head down, saying, Oh, he's a good husband, into the table.

The neighbor and dog are back on their side of the wall. You flinch in your sleep and the table shifts. The birds in the hedge below the window are not just sparrows. Some are the same, small black and white bulbs of feather that trade branches outside of my basement window. I go to the shelf in your hallway and pick a book I have seen there before—the spine is blue with white lettering: *The Birds of Massachusetts*. I go back to the kitchen and match the birds to their glossy images on the page. Here are the black-capped chickadees, from the tit family, who are known for their memory and their courage around humans. I open up a section of the window to hear their chitter through the screen. A breeze comes in, nice and cool, and eddys around the room.

Oh wonderful, you coo from your dreams, feeling the air move around you. I lean towards the window to hear the birds' songs. The sounds are constant and light: when one bird rests for a breath another sings.

And here is a tufted titmouse, its punkish plume and awkward lift of its body gawky and noticeable amongst the others. I watch it as it eyes the feeder from a bush along the driveway. It is tentative, working up the courage to approach the feeder and the other birds. Finally it lifts off, arcs and collides with the perch, nearly slipping from it as it swings, and the chickadees scatter and regroup elsewhere. The titmouse hastily takes a seed and bounds away, wanting to bury its head in its breast. I could not hear its song. It says in the book that often they are shy, but when they do whistle they whistle a peter-peter-peter.

I look up from the book to check on you and your head is up.

You are up and smiling at me.

What is it that you got there?

I lift up the book and show you the cover.

A book, I say.

Oh, is that what those are...I had no idea. You laugh at your joke, then nod. Will you read some to me?

Well, it's mostly pictures of birds with some information under them.

Oh my—the pitch of your voice rises—sounds interesting.

I shrug, lean forward over the book and read aloud the bullet points below the photograph.

I tell you that a Rock Pigeon is a bird of Massachusetts and its young have little lustre in their feathers. I tell you that the birds are typically monogamous and have up to two squabs in their brood and that makes you laugh because it is like you: typically monogamous with two birds hatched in your brood. And did you know that the Rock Pigeon can not dip its beak and drink water continuously, but has to tilt up its head to swallow? and that is like you too, your slow hand reaching across the table for that glass of water, pulling it towards you taking a deep breath and trying to meet it halfway with your lips before you jerk the glass up and your head is back and the water charges your mouth drowning you and then you go ahhhh setting the glass down refreshed and relieved that you do not have to drink again for at least a little while.

Fascinating, you say. Will you read me another?

I nod, sure, and flip to another page.

The book says that seagulls are also birds and also of Massachusetts. It says that they live long lives and some have even been recorded to have lived for as long as forty nine years. It says that seagulls are very intelligent birds with orange beaks that they use as tools for dropping breadcrumbs in water to bait fish and some gulls have even been

seen diving onto the backs of whales to pick and feed at their flesh. This makes you proud when I read you this, so proud you pick up your head and tell me to read it again and read it slow. I do and you look out to the slice of water above the trees as you listen and it makes you proud to think that everyone in Massachusetts, even the seagulls, are hunters of whales.

You peel back your lips and squint your eyes and I see this in you too. You are of Massachusetts, you have lived a long life here and have long teeth to grind down during the long, New England winters becoming muddy and short springs.

You told me that your husband went on a few dates with Sylvia Plath before he met you. He said she was too sensitive, but you, stubborn and low to the ground with wide shoulders jointed to wide hips, were a perfect ballast for his ship.

You tell me this story all the time and sometimes I think you tell me this story because when you see me you think the same thing: too sensitive; or, not built to last. When I walk in and sit across from you or take your hand and stand next to you, it is your presence that dominates and fills the room. I am small compared to you and overwhelmed. I'm not exciting, or tough. I'm not a seagull. I can tell it disappoints you. Maybe that's why you sleep.

I don't carry on conversations very well—I answer one of your questions with one word or two, and you look at me in expectation, as if you are waiting for me to say more.

You nod your head and turn your hand over in the air as if to say: Go on... Elaborate...

In my silence, you wait and think you might as well put the ol' head down.

I walk in and you see me and you think might as well put the ol' head down.

Sometimes I think your disease is getting worse and it's my fault. Maybe if I was more of a talker—if I spoke to you more. I can do that, I should be doing that—though I already know the stories you tell. I have asked you questions and I know your answers. I have been with you through seasons. You've told me the story about you and your sister going into the city with your grandfather and you've told me how you had a dog and how your father and your husband were both in the military and how you sailed at the yacht club and went to parties and church in town. You've told me about this town, how you love this town. You wrote a poem about it: Twin-lighted, stapled to rock. You don't talk about your mother.

There is nothing new. Nothing progresses in our days.

The moment I walk out the front door you forget me.

I am like a bird in your home. My heart beats in my eyes, looking this way and that, checking my head this way and that. I flit and freeze. I walk with high knees and reaching toes. I stalk around and make my feet soft when I'm in your house. I speak low. I keep my eyes low. I go to the bathroom and close the door soft. I turn the faucet on low

and wash my hands. I grimace as I flush the toilet, my brain tells the water shhhh as it runs.

I sit still in my chair, perched on this perch. I'm afraid to chitter or trill, to peter-peter-peter. I'm afraid that if I give you a fright while you're sleeping, you'll jump up and scream. You'll see me and not remember who I am and come at me with the bristle-side of a broom, sweeping me towards the nearest open window as I flutter my wings and bang against the walls and ceiling trying to convince you that it is okay, I am supposed to be here. I am a bird of Massachusetts! I am a bird of Massachusetts! I'd sing.

\* \* \*

I find a pile of cinder blocks and wood boards in the barn up by the main house. I imagine they have been there for sometime and I think about how I could use the leftover supplies to build a bookshelf for my room. My books are still stacked in the same columns and piles I put them in when I first moved in. The stacks have only gotten more and more disorganized since then, lopsided and leaning, with more and more books going unread.

I went to the hardware store once, back when I first moved in, to buy some wood and screws to build a bookshelf myself. It was something I had always wanted to do—to

build a simple thing to house my books. I had sketched out an easy design with a list of needed supplies on a piece of paper and I spent an hour in the store figuring out the type of wood I wanted and the type of varnish and how many boards I needed. And then I found out at the cash register with my wallet in my hand that wood is a lot more expensive than I realized. I flinched when the cashier said the total but I couldn't bring myself to say anything—I handed over my card anyway and took the wood back to my car. I sat in there in the parking lot, looking over the receipt furious with myself, swearing at myself, telling myself that I shouldn't have paid that much for wood. I can just find wood on the street, at the dump or around the property. I didn't need to waste money on something I could scrounge together.

I went back in the store, embarrassed and angry with myself, and returned the wood I had bought ten minutes before.

That was sometime last summer and the shelf has gone unbuilt. The books stayed in their piles and grew in their columns and the idea of building a bookshelf has nagged me since then. So when I see the cinder blocks stacked there next to the wooden boards in the back of the barn, I think oh I can just pile two stacks of cinder blocks and stretch these two by fours between them to make myself a bookshelf.

I choose three two-by-fours in good condition and six cinder blocks and load them into a wheelbarrow. I roll the load out of the barn and instead of taking the driveway

down the hill to my basement room, I turn into the woods and take the long way, down the overgrown fire road that empties out onto the road a block from the house I live in. I take the fire road because I don't want to run into one of the tenants or Gus. I know they'll see me and wonder about what I'm up to, and Gus will certainly ask what're ya doing kid? or, where'd ya get that wood and those cinder blocks kid? And I'm sure it's fine that I'm using the wood and cinder blocks because I found them in the back of the barn in a corner that no one ever goes, but I just don't want them to ask me about what I'm doing. I don't want to explain what I'm going to do with the wood and cinder blocks and if I run into Gus, he'd probably say something like well, I wouldn't do it that way, and then he'd offer up some advice or worse, his help, and I'd have to say no thanks, not trying to be rude or anything, I just want to do this on my own. I just want to build this bookshelf from scratch, my way, quickly and quietly, on my own, and when it's done it will be done as if it was always there, in my room, done.

It is hard pushing the wheelbarrow down the dirt road. The ground is uneven and steep. I almost lose the load trying to keep up with it, digging my heels into the ground to try and slow the wheelbarrow's speed down the hill. It tips aggressively and I set it down fast to prevent it from falling over. This happens a couple of times. I finally get to the road and turn towards the house. A car drives past and I keep my head down—I'm sure the driver looks at me as they pass, trying to figure out what I'm doing walking a

wheelbarrow full of wood and cinder blocks up a residential road. Probably up to something. I keep my head down. I keep walking and turn up the driveway to the house I live in. The neighbor sees me as he gets out of his car and I smile and quickly navigate the wheelbarrow up to the basement door. I prop the door open with a cement block and carry the wood through the laundry room and into my room. I set the wood in a pile and bring in each cinder block one at a time. I move the books from the wall and assemble the shelf. I place two of the cinder blocks on the floor first, then lay the first board across them. It fits perfectly between my desk below the window and the couch. I'll be able to get to a book when I write at my desk or when I am relaxing on the couch. I put the next two cinder blocks in position and lay the next board across them.

I finish the shelf in a couple of minutes. I do it almost too quickly—it took longer to unload the wheelbarrow than to build this thing. I sit down and start organizing my books, putting them in piles according to their authors' last name. Some of the books I had forgotten about and I kneel there and flip through them. I read a couple of lines here and there, remembering where I had got them. My father gave me this one, or I bought this one in New Mexico driving cross-country, or I bought this one when I went to Maine. I look at each book and put them in their respective order. I've nearly gone through all of them when I find the copy of *Moby Dick* I had picked up and tried to read so many times before. Call me Ishmael—that is how it goes. I turn the book over in my hands. The book

is small with its spine ends worn white by the shelf and the covers' corners starting to split. I picked it up from a 50 cent bin in San Francisco. I explored the city with it in my pocket. I really do need to read this book, I think. Call me Ishmael. How great it would be if I really read and understood this book; how great it would be to read it in one great burst of energy, in one go from morning into the night and probably morning again. Call me Ishmael. Moby Dick would be my book and I'd sing its praises and go to arms with every detractor I cross; I'd find it on the shelf of every bookstore I visit and say there is Moby Dick by Herman Melville, I have read that book.

I step back to admire how my room has come together. The wall there is handsome with its high window looking over my simple bed, then the chair pushed into the spartan desk there with its papers, my scribblings, and now the bookshelf heavy with books.

The space looks good—uncluttered and simple. This is all I want in my life.

I set Moby Dick on my desk. I'll bring it along when I see you tomorrow. You'll ask me to read something, something interesting, you'll say and I'll say oh I got just the thing, pulling the book out of my bag, opening to its first page. Call me Ishmael, I'll say and you will coo with pleasure. Such a wonderful start, what an opening line! and maybe I'll read the whole thing to you right there in your kitchen. Each day I'll come in and you, knowing exactly who I am, would say read me that book you've been reading, it's so

interesting, and I'll happily take it out, cough to clear my throat, and continue on where we had left of the previous day. Call me Ishmael and I'll read on and on, following the lines on, knowing what to say because here are the words written out for me and I'll say them and you'll react—you will coo or ask for me to repeat that line because it was such a wonderful line. I'll feel good because I am interacting with you. We'll be sharing this tangible thing, this long, beautiful book would be between us, whole and complete.

\* \* \*

I sneeze and you are up.

You pull your head up as if coming up from water, gasping I'm up I'm up.

You hold your head back, point your nose towards the ceiling to fight the weight of your head. It will just fall back down if you don't, if you let it.

You laugh. Jesus, you say.

I sit up in my chair. What about him? I ask and you laugh.

You lower your head and laugh again. Your eyes are still closed. You wipe your chin with the back of your hand.

Jesus, isn't it awful how tired I am?

I nod and look up at the clock.

So what is the plan? you ask.

You have still not opened your eyes. You lean forward in your chair.

Just our typical day. We'll hang out here for a bit and then go into town.

And what will we do in town?

We're going to lunch remember?

The word slips out and I feel guilty—I try not to say remember. I know it's not helpful or useful and it's frustrating for you because you do not remember. I lean forward towards you to apologize but you do not see. Your eyes are closed.

Oh, no I do not remember, but how exciting! you say.

Yes, it's very exciting. I put on a smile.

You lower your head onto the table. All I can see is the top of your head and the blue line of skin from which your hair grows.

I'm just going to put my head down for a minute and then we will go, ok?

I don't respond.

I look out the kitchen window and there is the garden: black from yesterday's rain. It is flat, nothing was planted and nothing is growing.

I look out and there are the trees, light-leafed and white-barked, lining the yard by the low stone wall. Your neighbor is gone. Above their green is a piece of ocean, flat and without sound, just like the sky.

I open up one of the windows and a breeze comes in cool from off the water, sifting through the screen into the kitchen. It gets so stuffy in your house. The air in here is so stale from the coughing heaters and spitting furnaces running all winter. I stand up from the table and open the sliding glass door that leads from the living room out to the porch.

Let's get some fresh air in here, I say.

You mumble into the table.

The wind storms up the hill into the room. Your home starts to inhale and exhale and I hear your snore from the kitchen—it is shyer now, like a whistle. I go into the hallway and open the front door to give the air direction, so it flows rather than builds up.

I walk up the long hallway. I can hear the birds chattering outside. I can hear the leaves. I look at the pictures of you on the wall. You grew up in this house. You have never lived anywhere else. There you are with your sister in the yard. There you are in a christening gown in your mother's arms. You get your nose from your her. You get your eyes from your father—there you are on a bike with him standing behind you keeping your balance with a light, steady hand. Two sets of the same eyes: small and sharp, coming out from heavy brows. Here you are with your husband, sitting in the living room I was just in moments ago, holding your newborn. Here you are with two young sons. Here you are on the porch in sunglasses. Here you are, suddenly older now, touching the

petals of a sunflower in your garden. I walk up the hallway, studying pictures I have walked past countless times and feel a fresh breeze push past me—I am finding the life in this house. Not giving it a new one, no, but picking it up like it's an old book and fanning out its pages so it can breathe. Let this book breathe. I go back into the kitchen. Your face is still down. You are mumbling. I can't hear what you're saying but I smile. Right now, today, it is endearing—how you sleep with your head on the table like that; how you sleep-talk nonsense; how you wake and fall asleep and you can't help but let your eyes close and lay your head down there.

The life in this house is your life.

This is so clear to me right now, sitting down at the table across from you, that I grin, amazed that it has taken me so long to realize such a thing. I have been selfish with my time here. I have worried so much about myself, sitting there across the table from you, that I have not opened myself up to being here in this home. I have not been here with you.

I sit back down and take out my copy of *Moby Dick*. I'll start reading this, I think, and you will wake and see me here, reading, and ask: What are you reading? Sounds interesting, will you read me some?

I scoot my chair back from the table so I can cross my legs. I open the book and read its first line.

Call me Ishmael. That's how it begins. Like skin, it begins and goes on. Feeling its pages on my fingers: brown and soft—there is dust on the paper.

I look up from the book—you are snoring now. Your back lifts and your lips whinney with the heavy exhale. Deep in sleep.

It is such a beautiful day and feels even more beautiful and rare thinking about how long winter had been. I want to get in my car, roll down the windows, and explore, pulling down thin paths off main roads to hidden coves, fruiting orchards, and yellow-grassed meadows. I want to drive to the end of Granite Pier and watch the waves crash into the rock.

An itch comes over me and the room feels hot. I don't want to sit anymore. I shouldn't be here, across the table from you. I want to go but I can not. It is hard to breathe here in your kitchen.

I try to go back to the book but it is impossible to read now. It feels so thick and distant—like lying belly-down on a pier with a palm of pebbles with the black water wrapping around the pier poles, clucking its tongue. I drop a pebble from my hand: it plops, then jags in the syrup and is gone. I drop another—the words on the page fall from me. Call me Ishmael—they pass through the water's murk, blinking with turning white light, getting deeper and then gone.

Call me Ishmael, for it is back to the beginning.

My back becomes tense. Out the window: the untethered ocean. It goes on and on.

I close the book and flip the pages along my thumb, scanning the depth of black.

All just words that go deeper and deeper on each sheet, front and back and such small lettering with so little paragraph breaks and it all seems to me a hassle—diving in, holding my breath, getting doused, knowing it.

\* \* \*

I sneeze and you chuckle into the table. You lift your head up and I sneeze again.

Goodness, do you have a cold?

It's just allergies.

You smirk. If you're sick you can always take a day off. I think I'll be able to manage without you, you say.

It's just allergies.

You nod.

Why don't you read me something since you're sitting there. Read me something interesting from whatever you got there.

I look down at the book open in front of me.

Call me Ishmael—on and on it goes.

I look up at you. There are your blue eyes—it is impossible. It all seems impossible to read this book and know you and I'm so afraid I'm indifferent.

I close the book and pick up an old copy of the town newspaper folded on the table. It is dated a week ago. I scan the front page looking for something interesting to read. I hear your chuckle through the paper.

How are the Sox doin? you call out in a Boston accent. I fold the paper down so I can see you.

Well this is an old paper so I couldn't tell you exactly.

Oh, ok.

Your smile fades a bit.

But I think they're doing pretty good. It's still early in the season, but they got a good team.

You nod. Oh good. I love the Red Sox...Have I told you how my grandfather would take my sister and I to Fenway all the time?

I nod. You'd take the train right?

You bite your lip. Your head bobs a little hanging over the table.

Yes. Oh it was quite the trip for a country girl like me. I remember looking out the window for the entire ride, watching the trees and lakes slowly become roads and apartment buildings.

I sit up in the chair and cross my arms. That's pretty exciting.

Of course, we were going to the big city!

Do you remember any of the players you saw? I ask.

You nod, bobbing your head. You close your eyes and recite: DiMaggio, Pesky, Williams, Doerr... That's all I remember.

I laugh. That's pretty impressive

You open your eyes again. Ted Williams was my favorite. Such a handsome man, tall and thin, but strong. Everybody loved Ted Williams.

You must've got some pretty good looks at him.

Of course! We're not going to go all the way into the city and sit in the nosebleeds.

I guess you're right.

We are both smiling. It is so pleasant in the room.

Again, your eyes close and you dip your face towards the table. Your whole body is forward. Your lips get small and you seem to be focused on something else, something right in front of you that I can not see.

How is he doing? You open your eyes and look at me. This season, I mean.

Who?

You laugh. Ted Williams, of course!

Oh. Well, he's dead now.

Oh really? and you chuckle, shaking you head. Well I hope that doesn't affect his swing.

\* \* \*

My legs are a little sore today. My eyes hurt too. I put my book away and look out the window. The light is too bright and I close my eyes. I have a headache, or the seed of one, distant and pulsing buried somewhere in my brain.

I look at the clock. It is finally time to go.

I call your name to wake you. It is time to get ready. It is time to go. You hear my voice and coo. The table shakes as your body flinches. You laugh and say oh, wonderful.

You are dreaming, I imagine.

Oh, wonderful, you say, but you do not pick up your head.

I stand up to show you that I am getting up, that I am up and it is time to go. I call your name again. It is time to get ready. It is time to go. We are going to go into town to get some lunch. Aren't you hungry 'cause I'm stahving, I say and I say it with a thick Boston accent. You snort again and sigh. Your cheek is glued to the table. Your shoulders shift as if to lift it free but they can't unstick it.

I look out the window and rest my voice. I feel like it is just sinking into your subconscious right now, becoming noise. I don't know. It feels good to stand.

I say that out loud: It feels good to stand.

You don't respond.

It is getting towards noon. We should be going soon. We need to go so we can be back in time to meet your husband. We are supposed to go get lunch in town and be back here at 1:15 to meet him. He is running errands right now. You do not remember this. You are always wondering where he is. Out running errands, I say. You look at me in shock when you hear this. A husband should never leave his wife, not even to run errands, you say.

I call your name again. I look at the clock.

I call your name again, louder and shorter, trying to sound stern. You do not respond. I sigh and look at my hands and then you gasp.

I am up I am up, you say, your whole upper body leaping from the table like a fish on a dock. You hold your head back and point your nose towards the ceiling to fight the weight of your head. It will just fall back down if you let it go.

You laugh. Jesus, you say.

I look up at you and say, a bit coldly, oh, you're up. Are you ready to go?

Oh? you say and look right at me. And where are we going?

Into town, to get some lunch.

Oh, excellent. I could go for some lunch. And where were we planning on going?

I walk out from behind my chair and pick up your purse from the floor.

Where do you want to go?

I get to choose?

Of course, you're the one in charge. I'm just following your lead.

You laugh: oh you're wonderful. Do you have a girlfriend?

No.

Well let me know when you get one and I'll tell her how wonderful you are.

Okay, sounds like a plan.

I open the purse. Everything is there: your wallet, your glasses, your comb and lipstick, an extra adult diaper wrapped up in a rubber band.

Well, shall we get going?

You are still sitting. I'm standing at the end of the table, trying to show you that I am up, that we are leaving.

Oh yes, but where are we going?

We're going to lunch.

I know that, and you roll your eyes dramatically, but where?

Where do you want to go?

Your eyes widen and you look up at me. You know what? you say and I know exactly what you are going to say. I would love a delicious piece of roast beef, you say.

We can do that. We'll go to the House of Roast Beef.

Oh, is there such a thing?

Of course, we go there all the time.

You laugh, your eyes close and head starts to droop. I watch it drop and I want to catch it, pull you up by your shoulders, snap and clap in front of your face and shout wake up wake up it is time to go! Oh, I would love a delicious piece of roast beef, you say before your head, at last, returns to the table.

I close your purse. Ok, I'm going to get the car ready and when I come back we'll leave.

You rub your cheek against the plastic dinner tray in a nod.

I walk into the hallway. I grab the walker propped up against the wall next to the bookshelf and I carry it down the two steps to the front door. I negotiate the walker's wheels and handles while pulling open the front door and pushing open the glass door. I set the walker down on the front step and guide the glass door back over the frame so it does not slam shut and lock. I walk across the front yard to my car in the upper driveway. I slide the walker into the backseat, then make sure the front seat is clean. I give it a couple of brushes with my hand and clear out the area where your feet will go.

I pull a knot of silver hair from the seat's headrest. I pinch it with two fingers and quickly drop it over the grass where it floats down slow then disappears.

I crack the window on your side and roll down the window on mine to get some air circulating through the car before you get in. It is a hot day and my air conditioning does not work.

I hear screams and splashes from the quarry at the bottom of the road. I walk across the yard and try to see through the trees to the pool of water. I can't see it. I lower my back and try and get a different angle. Are people swimming? The water would be so cold, but a dip does sound nice. I want to walk down and check it out. I never have before. How have I been coming to your house for this long and have never been down to the quarry? I should go right now. I check the front door of the house—it is still open. I am always paranoid about that. If the door closes, I'm locked out. I don't think you would hear if I knock. I would try but I don't want to make a scene, yelling your name, walking around your house, calling your name from the hedge below the kitchen window. I can see you lifting your head up, looking around the kitchen, before glancing outside and finding me down below waving my arms. You'd laugh, lean forward and try to open a window but be unable to, you'd have to walk around the table to the sliding glass door and come out onto the porch.

Hell-o you'd sing, how can I help you? not remembering who I am.

A car door closes and I make eye contact with your neighbor up the hill. I wave. They're getting something out of their trunk.

I turn back and look at the house. It is set into the hill with the porch reaching out towards the water. A seagull glides out from above the trees. It arcs above the house without moving its wings. It doesn't float down to the porch railing but continues on, out past the yard up the coast.

A breeze sends the tree leaves into applause.

I put my hands on my hips and am reminded about something you said on the first day I was with you. You were sitting there in your chair and I was sitting in mine across the table from you and there was a lull between us. I looked out the kitchen window—it was summer then, and it is almost summer again now—and I said something about the view, saying something like that you have a beautiful view here, and you chuckled in your way that was new to me then and said, oh yes, the ever-changing picture.

I worry about leaving you alone in the house for too long and I decide to head back inside.

I walk up the long hallway into the kitchen and you are in your chair like always but your head is gone and under the table.

I laugh and ask what are you doing?

You sit up at my voice and laugh at my laughter. You look up at me quizzically.

Where did it go? you ask.

Where did what go?

You gape in surprise as if I'm pulling your leg. You glance under the table again.

The dog that was just here, of course!

I shake my head. What dog?

The dog that was just here. I felt it brush against my leg. You didn't see it?

I shake my head.

What kind of dog was it?

I didn't see a dog.

You didn't?

I shake my head.

Maybe you were dreaming.

I was dreaming?

Maybe you were dreaming.

Oh my goodness. Dreaming—I must've been dreaming.

You were asleep.

It felt so real.

You laugh. You close your eyes recalling what had happened. The dog brushed past me leg under the table, making all this clatter. I could hear its collar and its paws

against the floor as it ran out into the other room. There was laughter in the other room—just around the corner—there was laughter out of sight but I could still hear it. The dog did too, it was running to it, making such a ruckus, bumping into the bureau there, making the china rattle. You pause. We were never allowed to have the dog in the house. It was too rowdy, it'd bump into everything and drove my mother crazy. Especially in winter, my father would let it in after trouncing around in the snow, tracking all of its wet and mud into the house. Drove my mother crazy, she'd yell at him and me and my sister would laugh. We loved the little pooch. Yes, in the other room too, we'd be sitting on the couch laughing and calling its name and it would jump up and lick our faces. It was one of those big hairy dogs that thought it was as small as a squirrel. What kind of dog was it? Oh, my memory is god awful...

Again you look up at me as if I knew the answer.

What kind of dog was it? you ask.

I don't know, I say.

You didn't see it? It ran just in there a moment ago, making all this noise.

I shake my head and shrug—it's all I can do.

I'm standing over you. I look at you in your chair and there are your eyes. They are water and are as deep and as impenetrable as the ocean outside your window. Standing there in your kitchen and looking into them I know that I do not know you and I

will never know you. In this moment, we are far from each other. I am young and you are old, I am a man and you are a woman, I am healthy and you are sick, and it is said I will see visions while you will dream dreams at the end of this time.

\* \* \*

What is the weather like out there?

It is very pleasant, I say.

You stand up, steadying yourself by the table, and pick through a pile of coats and sweaters on a chair.

Well, let's bring along one of these fleeces. A good New Englander doesn't go anywhere without a layer.

You pick at them with two fingers, trying to lift them up to get a better look.

Here, I say, putting down your purse. I pick up each fleece and show it to you.

Here's an orange one.

Oh isn't that wild.

What about this green one?

You look at it and then look to the chair, narrowing your eyes to see the options I'm not showing you.

What happened to the blue one? There should be a blue one?

I don't know what happened to the blue one. It's been missing the past couple of days.

Really? and you do not believe me. Your eyes go to the chair again to make sure.

I hold up the orange and green fleeces.

I think these are your best options.

Your eyes go from the orange to the green to the chair.

What about that black one?

That black one is for winter. It's too heavy.

Oh no...the black one is the one I want.

I think you're going to be too hot in it.

I'll be fine, you say and reach for it yourself. Your hand is like a beak picking at the limp sleeve, trying to pull the coat out from the bottom of the pile. I let you try, knowing you won't be able to—your whole right arm is pretty useless. You continue to try with your other palm planted on the kitchen table for balance. It is like you're shaking the coat's hand.

I put the fleeces down and pull the coat out for you.

You smile. Oh thank you, you're so helpful.

I pick up your purse and drape the coat over my arm.

Ok, it's time to go.

Yes, I'm stahving, you say in a Boston accent.

You laugh and I make a point of not laughing. I don't even smile or look at you like I didn't even hear your joke. I want you to know that I'm upset about the coat.

We walk out of the kitchen. I hold your purse and the bulky coat and I walk first down the hallway towards the front door. You follow behind me, dragging your good hand along the wall. You stop and call out to me.

You got my purse and everything?

You bet, I say.

You're wonderful.

You look down at your feet and continue on down the hallway.

I take your hand, open the front door and help you over the threshold.

What a beautiful day, you say. Nice and warm.

I nod. About time.

We cross the front lawn hand in hand.

Is this your car? you ask.

There she is.

I help you into the car. I open the door for you and you say oh, you're such a gentleman and I say just doing my job. I steady the door as you put your weight onto it as

you try and lift your foot up and into the front seat. You manage it but get caught with your head ducked low so you won't bang your head. You laugh and huff, shifting the foot you have planted on the driveway, trying to figure out a way to get that leg to follow the other. I offer to take your other hand but you ignore it. You have one foot in and one foot out and your upper body is folded at your stomach to protect your head. You chirp in discomfort, your shoe scuffles against the loose gravel, and you just fall into the seat.

Very smooth, I say.

I place your purse between your feet. I put the coat in the back seat by your walker so you will forget about it when we get into town.

All settled?

Oh, yes.

I grab the seat belt and reach over you to buckle you in. I hold my breath. I hear the click of the buckle and straighten up.

Ok, I say and close the car door.

I pause for a moment, taking in the fine weather. A breeze runs through the trees. It ripples drily through the leaves. There is no laughter coming up from the quarry—the swimmers have come and gone. Your house lays back in the hill looking out towards the ocean. It is so low, set and solid, as the whole hill breathes and moves and changes around it.

I get in the car and turn it on. Johnny Cash's *American V: A Hundred Highways* starts to play as I back out of the driveway.

Is this Johnny Cash?

Yup.

You chuckle. Oh, wonderful, you say and start to sing along as we drive into town.