

Propagation

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Abstract

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Where do we place the desire to use our grief as a souvenir of what we've lost? *Propagation* envisions a world that turns this kind of grief into an asset by processing it into a source of literal power. In this alternate world, human bodies produce a grief-triggered hormone – memorin – that can power their electrical grids. When a person misses someone deeply, their memorin levels skyrocket. Authorities then extract the hormone and funnel it into their cities' electrical systems. A groundbreaking series of experiments identifies an even more potent source of memorin: the grief people feel toward their childhood selves. Through the narrative of a woman giving birth to her younger self, this novel explores the intricate redundancies of the grief we feel about our childhoods. How can we let go of the past in a way that honors it while providing an honest kind of closure?

Poetics Statement on *Propagation*

In common psychological models, the stages of grief begin with denial and culminate in a final stage of acceptance. Over the past few years, I've found myself contemplating a stage of grief that combines both these stages: a denial of the loss, through the acceptance of its pain as a substitute for the deceased. *If my pain is here, we think, my loved one is still here.* Where do we place the desire to remain in grief indefinitely, the desire to use it as a souvenir of what we've lost? I find that popular culture and media often overlook the potency of this grief response. It happens when the act of missing those we've lost feels like partaking in a sacrament of honesty. We revel in our pain because our pain is all we have left of them, and so it keeps them alive.

My MFA thesis, *Propagation*, is an abridged version of a novel whose setting is predicated on this kind of grief. Its alternate reality turns absences into assets through biological, sociological, and industrial means. In *Propagation*, humans have developed an extra organ and hormone — the memorin gland and memorin, respectively — as an evolutionary response to grief. Their cities use a process called extraction to remove excess memorin from a person's system after they lose a loved one. Processing plants then refine this memorin to power the electrical grid of a city. Flora is my main character. A professional worker in the extraction system, she's all too familiar with the ins-and-outs of removing someone's deceased kin from their memories. Meanwhile, Flora feels a deep sense of incongruity between her adult life and the traumatic childhood she escaped.

As it turns out, one's grief toward their younger self can cause memorin to surge in strange ways. Flora joins a study that allows her to harness this special grief, and at the end of the process, she gives birth to an eleven-year-old-Flora. As she raises this girl as her own daughter, she must return to her hometown and reconcile her traumatic past with the girl who had to live through it. Is it a cruelty or a mercy to pull child-Flora forward through a decade? Regardless, is it helpful to cling to childhood so tightly that we would salvage that self from the past at the expense of closure?

In terms of genre, I would class *Propagation* as a literary science fiction novel. A fitting subgenre is biopunk, which I researched while drafting. Biopunk's naming convention follows that of other science fiction subgenres like cyberpunk and steampunk. Cyberpunk settings emphasize high-tech concepts, such as artificial intelligence. Steampunk fiction envisions worlds where steam-powered machinery prevails as the main form of industry. *Propagation* includes an artificial intelligence, as well as the analog and retrofuturistic aesthetics that characterize steampunk. However, the world of my thesis prizes the power of the human mind and body above all other resources.

To inform my biopunk setting, I read the book *Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society and Science Fiction* by Lars Schmeink. Schmeink defines biopunk as a commentary on the commodification of human lives and bodies, as well as a reminder of how adaptable living creatures can be. He references our culture's growing interest in the "Quantified self;" we seek out numerical data about our genes and health in a quest to better understand ourselves (Schmeink 5). *Propagation* contributes to the tradition of this subgenre by considering a world where human industry and progress hinge on a quantified self. The memorin gland transforms feelings of loss into a quantifiable, endocrinological metric. The electrical grid of *Propagation*

takes these metrics to their extreme. In each household, light and heat depend on a generator that can only run on the fuel of memorin. In this way, the body and mind become quite literally commodified. The extraction process stands in for real-world exploitations of labor and health, as well as the push to compartmentalize our grief away so we can continue to function in polite society.

Biopunk Dystopias situates other stories — films, books, and video games — as allegories similar to mine. Schmeink discusses how Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* both deal with the topic of energy sources. He writes that in *The Windup Girl*, the mechanisms that power machinery “need to be wound through muscle power as ‘batteries’ for transportation and production” (Schmeink 79). Whereas *The Windup Girl* runs on the units of calories and muscle, *Propagation* functions on the power of emotional relinquishment. Machinery becomes an extension of the human body; in *Propagation*, the home is an organ in itself. Flora and her housemates' hormone levels affect the functioning of their home through a memorin meter, which detects changes in their levels and modulates the household's electricity in response. Briefly, I found inspiration from Gaston Bachelard for this element. Writes John R. Stilgoe in the 1994 foreword to *The Poetics of Space*, “In the house, Bachelard discovers a metaphor for humanness” (Stilgoe vii).

Biopunk stories allow us to understand the role our bodies play as pawns or currency in our real-world dystopia. I view the biopunk subgenre as a sci-fi cousin to body horror. This horror trope uses uncanny versions of human bodies to unnerve readers, such as through the influence of parasites, mutilations, and diseases. In the vein of body horror, Schmeink gives Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as an example of a reproductive form of biopunk. “Human procreation,” he writes, “has become a specific market within consumer society” (Schmeink

133). A child-as-commodity worldview takes the allegory of biological exploitation further, even before we consider the legislative issue of reproductive rights. Children can function as status symbols and hubristic reminders of our own powers of creation. Additionally, a child represents a long-term commitment that defies the independence that our society values (Schmeink 135). This positions offspring not just as commodities but also as othered entities, or even as monsters, like the creature in *Frankenstein*. After all, as Schmeink quotes from humanities professor Jeffrey Cohen, “The monstrous body is pure culture” (Schmeink 132). When a child is also a posthuman being, it comes to represent our fears about the kind of future our culture is giving birth to. I’ll discuss this topic of offspring more later, in the context of cloning.

The hormonal science of *Propagation* has a very loose basis in reality, but I did some research to inform this aspect. Hormone extraction is a real process, which scientists perform to study and identify endocrines (Binkley 14). Our cells use “set point regulations” to moderate hormone levels (Binkley 19). I externalized these regulators into a mechanical fixture, the memorin meter, which works like a thermostat as I described above. The memorin meter system is a bit like a negative feedback loop, which most hormones function on. I’m aware that my endocrine knowledge is not the most extensive. I learned what I *do* know from textbooks and a single undergraduate course on hormones. I also realize that the field is ever-changing, and endocrinologists still have limited or reductive knowledge in many areas. My aim is not to pretend to be an expert on the subject, but to use bodily processes as a starting point for my allegory about loss.

Propagation has a philosophical premise in addition to its biological one. At the start of my writing process, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* by Umberto Eco provided me with a framework for this philosophy. Semiotics is the study of signs, which deals in the

relationship between a signifier (often a word) and a signified (the word's meaning), as well as an interpretant. As I read this text, I began to contemplate the distance between a signifier and what it signifies, particularly in terms of grief. A sign is, as Eco puts it, "a dialectic of presence and absence" (Eco 23). Like the ones and zeros of binary code, signs operate on this discrepancy of nothing against something. In the philosophy of *Propagation*, loss functions in a similar way. When we remember those we've lost, we conjure the truth of the person's former existence against their absence. The memory becomes a sign of the self. As I wrote my novel, I invented a human organ that embodies this worldview: the memorin gland.

In his chapter on signs, Eco discusses the medieval philosopher Augustine's theories about nothingness. Augustine defines the signifier /nothing/ as an "*affection of the soul*, that is, the state of mind which, although not recognizing something, recognizes at least its absence" (Eco 35). I wanted this signifier of absence to sit at the heart of my thesis. If nothingness is a state of mind, what would happen if we built an entire society and power structure around that mindset?

The next layer of *Propagation's* plot details the process of recovering a former presence from the hollow of its absence. I began to consider nostalgia — the sense of missing your past self — as a special form of grief. Flora, my main character, mourns the person she could have become if she'd been raised under different circumstances. She resents the childhood she spent in a milltown, where harsh strictures about human resources kept her extracting memorin regularly. The heart of the novel is Flora's relationship with her younger self, whom she's able to pull from her memories and give birth to as a new person. For this part of the thesis, I consulted *Hatching: Experiments in Motherhood and Technology* by Jenni Quilter. While *Hatching* focuses on IVF, it contains many reflections on the nature of pregnancy in general. Gametes combine and cells

divide. We cannot see directly into our bodies, but we can infer the processes taking place there through ultrasound. Quilter muses that “To see your insides with your own eyes — rather than simply possess them unconsciously and involuntarily — is a remarkably recent development” (Quilter 19). When Flora gestates her younger self, I made the process an exterior one that she can watch via an extracorporeal womb. This emphasizes the chronological and spatial distance she feels from her childhood. Such a disconnect also mirrors the estrangement that comes with grief. The act of remembering a loved one is not the same as conjuring them back into reality. With her daughter-self, whom she names Fern, Flora soon realizes this.

The temporal aspect of the birth is important. Flora forces her younger self to cross the boundary of a decade and enter the time period where her adult self exists. Because of this, Fern is like one of the uncanny offspring that Schmeink discussed in *Biopunk Dystopias*. In *Hatching*, Quilter notes that “the outsourcing of conception beyond two bodies is seen as a violence” (Quilter 132). She also refers to one of Zeno’s paradoxes about time. Time cannot be halved, because if we halved it again and again, indefinitely, it would be asymptotic and we would never reach a solid increment. Writes Quilter, “I wanted to prove [Zeno] wrong. After all, if I had a child, I would literally become divisible” (Quilter 56-57). Flora becomes divisible in an even more literal way than traditional birth. She essentially clones herself, but the muddy temporal element complicates her relationship to her clone. There’s a redundancy of experience here. What Fern has experienced, Flora has also experienced. And yet — time cannot be halved any more than a person can.

In addition to Zeno’s paradox, Quilter makes use of the internet as a metaphor. “The internet became my atlas, my way of knowing,” she explains, “and the fact that it was constructed by others’ prior searches was both comforting and terrifying” (Quilter 156). This

brings me to the final layer of *Propagation*'s narrative: the Substrate, a powerful intelligence constructed from reintegrated clones. Like the internet, the Substrate exists as a conglomeration of consciousness. She cannot think for herself, but she also *is* thought itself. She brings the sensibility of the grief-run grid to its most extreme form. A substrate is a surface on which life grows. In biology, a substrate is a compound on which an enzyme acts (Binkley 267). Thus, such a structure often takes a passive role. In *Propagation*, the Substrate is a blank slate. She takes on the characteristics of those whose selves adhere to her. These are not complete humans that constitute her brain, though; they have the same fallibility as all our memories of our dead.

I consulted Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Massage* to inform my characterization of the Substrate as an internet. This experimental book, first published in 1967, explores the *form* of media as an influence on humanity — even more so than its content. While McLuhan focuses on television and radio, *The Medium* feels prescient about the impacts that the internet would have as a form of media. “The worldpool [sic] of information fathered by electric media,” he writes, “far surpasses any possible influence mom and dad can now bring to bear” (McLuhan 14). The internet has become a force that raises children; it learns from us but also teaches us. The Substrate embodies this dichotomy. She is made of humans but also shapes humanity when she takes over the grid. Even more relevantly, McLuhan compares media to parts of a human body: “electric circuitry [is] an extension of the central nervous system” (40). The electricity in *Propagation* is literally an extension of human endocrine systems. Wires function as an externalized bloodstream while each household acts as a gland or vessel. As in McLuhan's philosophy, the medium through which information and electrical impulses travel matters just as much as the impulses themselves. We must adapt our messages to our media as it changes. “Formerly, the problem [of science-fiction writing] was to invent new forms of labor-saving,” he

writes. “Today, the reverse is now the problem. Now we have to adjust, not to invent. We have to find the environments in which it will be possible to live with our new inventions” (124). The Substrate is a form of adjustment to a world that extracts people’s grief from them in order to keep things running. Like the internet, she is a structure that people have to meet on her terms instead of their own. She is both concept and object. This connects with Eco’s discussion of the tenor and the vehicle, the signifier and the signified: the loss we feel is modulated by the words we use to describe it and the systems we use to codify it. The digital world makes it that much easier to preserve those we’ve lost in their final, inert forms.

It’s clear that I could not have written *Propagation* without the fuel of all this research. I collected inspiration from many fiction novels, too. The genre of literary science-fiction formed a well of novels that I drew from. *This Time Tomorrow* by Emma Straub provided me with a model for switching between timelines and connecting a protagonist with their younger self. Straub’s middle-aged protagonist, Alice, wakes up as her sixteen-year-old self and bonds with the past version of her now-dying father. The superimposition of adult Alice over adolescent Alice especially struck me. “It was like there were two of her...” Straub writes, “sharing the same tiny patch of human real estate” (Straub 97). Alice gains perspective by occupying her teen body. Flora does the same, but instead of regressing in time to be her preadolescent self, she pulls that self forward as a separate entity. In place of reconnecting with a parent, she *becomes* the parent.

Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro is a masterclass on gradually introducing one’s reader to the world of a story. Ishiguro raises questions about humanity, resources, childhood, and the common good that *Propagation* also asks. The voice of the main character, Kathy H., captures the wistfulness at the heart of all these issues. She must allow surgeons to harvest her

organs, as has been the plan for her life since she was born — cloned — but it's her childhood that she dwells on the most. "I half-closed my eyes," Kathy reflects, "and imagined the spot where everything I've ever lost since childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it" (Ishiguro 263). Flora feels the same fervent pull toward the objects of her childhood, of which few remain in her adult life. I created a dichotomy similar to the one Ishiguro presents: the cold, ordered, literally draining world of adulthood against the hazy, enclosed indoctrination of childhood. There's a sense of pain when Kathy and Flora superimpose these two worlds, and yet it must be done if they want to understand the psychological cause-and-effect that characterizes their lives.

Perhaps the novel most influential to my writing has been *Amatka* by Karin Tidbeck. Tidbeck immerses readers in the fictional, industrial city of Amatka with few clues as to the nature of its existence. Some critics discuss Amatka as though it were a colony on a different planet; others treat it like a fantasy world or an alternate reality. I wanted the setting of *Propagation* to feel similar to Amatka, almost allegorical in its vagueness. Both settings use low-tech, analog devices whose presence obscures the time period, in combination with a philosophical power source that surpasses those in our real world. In *Amatka*, the existence of physical objects depends on people labeling each item and naming it aloud. A thing only exists if it's given words. In *Propagation*, deceased people continue to exist in the minds of their loved ones. Here, instead of being a liability, the fantastical element is a form of energy that humans can harvest. Like Tidbeck, I concerned myself with the municipal angle of this magic. How would a city run on something so nebulous? What would their social structures look like, when people must preserve and then fully release their memories of the dead?

The indefinite settings of all these books inspired me to create an alternate world with its own human structures, phenotypes, and rules (both natural and imposed). Other inspirations include *The Memory Police* by Yoko Ogawa, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* by Alexandra Kleeman, *Mem* by Bethany C. Morrow, and the film *Petite Maman* by Celine Sciamma.

My thesis began as a series of more-or-less disconnected scenes that I strung together and then added transitions in between. I had the first twenty-five or so pages solidified fairly quickly, but the rest came more slowly and took much reworking. The version of *Propagation* that became my thesis is missing many of those transitional scenes, but I streamlined the plot so it would have more focus for the shorter form I was shooting for. The definitive version of *Propagation* lies somewhere between this abridged version and the longer piece. While I like the simplicity of the thesis variation – with its focus on the three characters of Flora, Dr. Kenneth, and Fern – the long version has a more well-earned ending that fits Flora’s character growth (I just didn’t have room for it in the pared-down thesis). Her willing sacrifice of Fern, on her own terms as opposed to as an offering to Dr. Kenneth’s project, acts as the culmination of her grief journey. In contrast, the thesis ending is bleaker and gives Flora less agency, but I like it as a way to usher in the Substrate chapters more efficiently. In the full novel, I interspersed the Substrate chapters among Flora’s story instead to build a sense of tension.

The longer novel certainly has more room to breathe. Flora spends time with other participants in Dr. Kenneth’s experiment, during which they see hints at the sinister nature of the program. Thus, she gradually learns about the Substrate and the sacrifices it requires. The abridged novel allows us to follow Flora through a longer stay at the milltown; the full novel gives us a broader picture, showing other people’s births and more scenes of Flora’s housemates. I plan to continue my work on this story by taking the pieces I appreciate from each version and

meshing them together. I'm still learning about my writing process, which differs wildly between projects. For *Propagation*, I've found that I need to give myself space to explore the world and the story's possible iterations. The thesis is one of those iterations, and I think it serves its purpose as a completed story. As I continue to revise, I'd like to deepen the sense of Flora's bond with Fern and truly explore the complexities of their relationship.

I've also been considering how to situate *Propagation* within a broader framework. Primarily, I'd like my work to have a place in the cultural conversation about grief and loss. I always contemplate our tendency to archive things digitally as a way of preserving their realness to us. Personally, this manifests as a hard-drive overloaded with photos, old artwork, and an archive of emails starting from when I was eleven. Photos and other relics of our past selves bring us simultaneously closer to that self and further from them. Each remnant is both a frame and a portal. The Substrate encompasses this. With *Propagation*, I wanted to provide an answer to the overwhelm and stress that come with not wanting to lose a single piece of our past. How can we let go in a way that honors our younger selves and provides closure through honesty? I think we need to look beyond the objects that encode that past for us – and into the reality of our present lives – to make peace with our child selves' places in our hearts. While we don't have to numb ourselves to grief, we also don't have to cling so tightly. This is a reminder I need often. It's a reminder that writing my thesis drove home for me. To miss something deeply is to love it, but to allow ourselves to grow around and through that grief is another powerful kind of love.

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PROPAGATION

Lindsey Keefer

PART I

8 months Pre-Substrate

If there is an afterlife, it exists in the human prefrontal cortex.

The words shone cheaply on the Office of Losses' lunchroom wall. They'd been reinforced there in all manner of ways over the years: first as a decal that flaked off in plasticky dandruff, then as dull paint, and finally in the sans-serif chrome lettering before Flora. Through years of meal breaks, her perception had pushed the words to background noise. They'd begun to exist to her like a door or fire alarm, purely utilitarian. But today they echoed clearly in her mind.

Flora dumped the remnants of her dinner into the chutes by the microwave, where the scent of overheated halibut always lingered. Compost, refuse, recycling. She clicked open her briefcase and plucked out the few memorin vials from her last patients of the day. Those went in the hatch for medical waste. The sponges, heavy with extracted memorin, went into the outbox to be sent to the Center for processing.

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As household historian, Flora kept a record of all her housemates' losses. It was a steep learning curve at first. Millie had lost her father to drowning years ago, but the depth of her grief hadn't struck Flora until it was too late and Millie had begun crying tears of seawater. They'd tasted like algae, she said.

Kara's grandmother died in her sleep one winter. Flora's own childhood friend, out in the milltown, had fallen into a bone meal mill and been churned into dust.

And just a month ago, Sydney's sister had gone hiking up north and was crushed beneath a tree.

That was how Flora knew, when the house went dark that night, that Sydney was to blame. She'd been fiddling with the radio on Flora's desk when the bulbs above the women

fluttered their gold rays to black. The objects in Flora's bedroom regressed into shapes. The angular lump of the chair like a blueprint for itself, the anonymous square of Flora's door so dark it became a portal.

Flora shoved her hand into her pocket, got ahold of a flashlight, and forced it on with a jab of her thumb. She shone it over the edge of the bed, where she still sat. Sydney had lifted her hand from the radio, so the blank noise between stations snowed on them. She stepped back from the gaze of the flashlight and the non-noise of the static. She became pure shape, like everything else.

Then her form wavered. There was the rasp of wool swiping wood and Sydney scrabbling for balance. She stooped and hurled the yarn out of her way, having caught herself mid stumble. "Goodness, Flora, would it kill you to throw *something* away for once?" She plucked another object from the floor, most likely a floppy doll, and flung that aside, too. It landed with its arms and legs splayed, a pale starfish clinging to the armoire.

Sydney's indignation had broken a seal and now Flora was able to talk, was able to say, "Sydney, I think you need to extract more often. I can get you on a higher quota."

Sydney had bent to pick something else up but now snapped upright. Then, after a moment, she stooped and tossed a crumpled gown from the floor onto Flora's desk. Flora winced. That had been her mother's maternity dress. Sydney kicked the jar of baby teeth into a corner, shoved a lopsided stack of children's books aside. Her anger made the actions quiet, turned them into understatement. "This place is a hazard," she scoffed.

Flora's cheeks blazed. Warmth filled the plastic exogland in her chest. "No. You're the hazard."

The truth of that struck them both like flame to a match head.

Sydney's dead sister remained a presence in their house, even after intensive extractions. Sydney still froze up whenever she caught so much as a whiff of pine. The household would never meet quota if that continued.

Now it was the house's turn to freeze up, as if it had an immune system and had caught a head cold from Sydney. This was their punishment for heightened levels. Darkness, silence, cold, all absences spurred on by a different sort of absence.

Of course Sydney knew what Flora meant when she called her a hazard. They both smelled it: the solid, fibrous aroma seeping in beneath the bedroom's opened windowpane. And they heard it: the whorled trunk whimpering as wind pummeled it. Branches cracking against one another, loud as thunder.

The substance of memory had no doubt solidified inside Sydney. A tree collapsed over and over in her mind, hugging bone and sinew against soil. And now it was toppling in Flora's mind, too.

"You're wrong." The words came from a mouth as rigid as iron. Sydney gave her head a violent shake. "I'm doing great. I'm extracting as much and as often as I can. It's someone else."

Flora hopped out of bed and brushed past her into the hallway.

In the sitting room, the uncanny tang of indoor heating had dissipated into a chill that burned the rims of her nostrils. Penlight in hand, and with only its dim pool to see by, she maneuvered across the rug to the blue dot of light beside the front door. The household memorin meter.

The dial in the meter raised its hand like the tattletale student at the front of a classroom. Flora clicked the button and a message ticketed out on thin paper. **MEMORIN LEVELS: RED. REPORT TO NEAREST EXTRACTOR AND CONTRIBUTE TO MUNICIPAL MEMORIN**

SUPPLY. IF RESPONSIBLE PARTY RESISTS, CONTACT OFFICE OF LOSSES. Then the telephone number for an extractor printed out.

That was how Flora found herself at a public phone in the middle of the night, bundled up to her neck, flicking the switches to contact the nearest extraction office. Thanks to her job, she knew the number by heart and had left the meter ticket crumpled in the hearth.

The ringer scrolled. It sounded to Flora like the turning of a pegged wheel against her ear. The thought made her smile wistfully; when she was a kid, she'd thought each phone held a tiny man in it to sort through the digits. He would lift his puny ear to hers and pay reverent attention to the numbers she selected. She almost whispered *hello* to him, as she'd done back then. But she kept silent. Her smile shrunk and began to hurt her face. Suddenly, she felt dangerously close to tears.

There were people, of a sort, in the electricity; that much was true. But no tiny man in the receiver.

The admin who picked up left no room for introductions. "Who is this for?" they intoned.

Flora shook herself and set the memory aside. "Not myself," she said, which wasn't necessary, but her head and hands were buzzing with cold. "Sydney – she's a household member – Sydney's sister died this past month. I'm the house historian so I thought I'd do the call."

A pause. "All right. I'm assuming your household levels are red. Which Sydney?"

"Sydney Stets." She recited their address.

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The dark of the house opened up into slashes of light, which crisscrossed each other on the floor like dueling swords. In the sitting room, these lines met luminous circles at their source: the household's supply of flashlights.

“What woke you?” Flora asked her housemates. Her gaze roamed across the room, trying to make sense of which lump was who, and which lobes of darkness were simply shadows. From the directions and positions of each light, she was able to deduce that Kara sat at the hearth, her hair in braids. And Millie and Louise sat huddled together in the armchair. Sydney stood near the kitchen with an untethered, spooked shine in her eyes.

“Kara was reading when her light went out,” said Millie. “She woke us up.”

“We all would’ve had to at some point,” Kara added, defensive without reason, her head inclining. “I was just getting us gathered and ready.”

Louise got straight to the point: “So whose memorin levels are shooting through the roof? In the middle of the night?”

The household never pointed fingers until after a lengthy discussion, but Flora noticed that they all avoided looking at Sydney. “Like Kara, I was reading,” Flora said, which was mostly true.

“I was fast asleep, of course,” cut in Millie. She cuddled into her armrest. They could all believe that.

“And you, Sydney?” piped up Kara.

Flora tried her hardest not to stare at Sydney, but did anyway. And then Sydney was looking at her.

“I went to Flora’s room with the radio, but before that I was asleep.”

They waited for her to continue.

“Tell them I don’t have those dreams anymore,” she implored Flora. Not just because Flora was the only extractor in their household, but also because they’d been together. For a period of time, Flora had woken to Sydney’s half-dreaming sobs, and she’d rubbed Sydney’s

back until the latter fell into sleep, her mind blank once more. But it was possible that she'd been lying – that those dreams had never dissipated at all, or even that they'd worsened. Flora wouldn't know. She didn't share Sydney's bed any longer.

She strode over to Sydney and offered another activated tube of coffee. "I don't know who else it'd be, Syd. Our levels are in red. If there's anything left, even a single hairpin or rabbit in your dream" – these were both symbols reminiscent of her sister, though the other housemates wouldn't know what Flora was talking about – "it could be the culprit." Of all the forms grief could take, dreams were the worst. They whittled away at the solidity of a dead person, uncovered soft immateriality beneath. Dissolved the bones and left layers of tissue and cartilage.

"Well." Sydney's mouth set into a stubborn line, but then she shrugged as if giving up. "I don't know. There was a mouse, but I was reading *Stuart Little* last night. That could be all it was. I think that's all it was. Children's classics have nothing to do with my sister."

Morning had finally softened the windowpanes in that way that made them resemble gelatin, so the household clicked their flashlights off.

"Sydney," Flora said as gently as she could, "I'm an extractor. Every day, I see countless patients with issues of the soul." She used the euphemism here, though she wasn't fooling anyone. "It can be a massive relief to get help."

"It was a mouse, not a rabbit! I swear on it!"

The doorbell chimed. They all went straight as pipes.

"Florence should answer it," said Kara immediately.

Flora's instinct was to fight this, but she saved her strength and went to the foyer. The pin of light continued to glow from the memorin meter, still the only bit of electricity in the house. Its bright little mouth gaped, hungry for one of them to extract a bit of the hormone – memorin –

so that it could power everything back on. This same thing had happened not two weeks ago. Flora gripped the door handle with both hands.

Things got much worse when the extractor – a short, angular man – stepped into the porch’s emergency lights and that look came over his face, that eye-widening smile-growing look of recognition one government worker gives another. He remembered her. His wrinkles were like tiny, redundant smiles under the eyes and extending along the chin. Usually Flora would lose the pain in her shoulders, release the narrowing of her eyes, and return the warm look.

But they knew each other from one of the most harrowing extractions she’d ever done – on a child who’d lost his parents on the way to a family reunion. They’d met the boy roadside at a rest stop. He went on and on about how, if he could just continue to the reunion, he’d find his parents there.

They’d been robbed and murdered at the rest stop while he waited in the railcar. When Flora and the extractor met with him, the parents’ bodies were already halfway to a milltown to be turned into pig feed.

The memorin dripped through Flora. Usually it was a prickle, a chill shower at the back of the neck, but here and now it sheeted down her front in a cold surge. She condensed her hands into fists, trained her focus on the extractor.

He still had that sweet, wrinkled look. It made her feel awful in a new way now, because that recognition always meant collusion; he was allying himself with her, a colleague, and suddenly it was them versus the household. Him and Flora against her friends.

If only these women – Sydney especially – understood that the Office was only here to help them, to help everyone.

“Come on in,” Flora said, and she stepped aside.

The extractor checked the meter. He slid his finger into the rolls behind the ticketing mechanism, peered inside, and then closed it back up.

Flora’s housemates’ faces turned upward at the sound of boots shushing against carpet. The extractor strode into the center of the sitting room. “Let’s be civil about this,” he said. He made room for Flora to stand beside him, which she did begrudgingly. “Who here is experiencing acute loss?”

“My uncle,” offered Millie. “Four months ago. I was on a biweekly regimen, and now I hardly remember his name.”

“Very good.” The extractor wrote this down.

Kara told him about the loss of her childhood friend a year ago. Louise had not experienced notable grief in years. It had also been a few years since loss had last made its home in Flora.

“And you?” the man asked Sydney.

She shook her head and pressed a hand to her mouth and nose, like breathing through her fingers would stop tears from falling. “My sister. We lost her in the late summer.”

“Well, it’s only September. It’s possible she’s still stuck in your head.”

Flora could practically see the ghost of Sydney’s sister swimming in the tank of the woman’s cranium.

But Flora had not been entirely honest. She, too, felt downward strokes sending waves through her, felt small things dripping from the ceiling of memory and casting deep ripples.

In truth, the swimmer in Flora’s head had Flora’s own shape, her own mannerisms. It was of course smaller than she was — in proportion as well as size. Even if it had been scaled up to

match her 165-centimeter frame, the figure had stouter fingers, legs with less musculature, and a jawbone padded with baby fat.

And that made all the difference. Because right before Sydney had brought the radio into her bedroom, Flora had been reading the diary she'd kept as a child.

If she thought about it for long enough, it was obvious: Flora felt grief. Only, the grief she felt was directed toward someone whose cells her own cells had replaced. It was not someone she'd ever seen with her own two eyes, except distorted in a mirror.

The morning after Sydney's extraction, Flora's office was more an excavation site than a therapy space. The new extractor she'd been assigned, who'd introduced himself as Dale, sent the patient's heart rate all over the scale each time he lifted a tool from his case and plunked it on Flora's desk.

The poor patient, reclined in an overstuffed chair, only had eyes for the sticks and vials and datatapes before him. Even as Flora pressed her fingers around his exogland and snapped the prongs out from the punctures in his chest, he hardly winced, hardly moved at all. The Center had sent the Office of Losses a man like a cave — all tucked in on himself. Flora could see where he receded at his core, darkened to the gnash of stalagmites and stalactites. His face was limp, as if the muscles in his cheeks had refused to hold their form.

Flora emptied the memorin-rich blood from the synthetic gland into a vial, settled the vial in its centrifuge slot, and pressed *start*. The machine blurred to shapelessness.

She excused herself and took a trip down the hall to the supply annex, where she fetched a drinking glass for the patient. When she returned, the extractor was still at the table playing with his instruments and ignoring the rest of the room. Flora of all people understood the pull of the physical object, the comfort of something solid in your palm, but this was just unprofessional.

"Okay, check the dilute," she instructed.

Extractor Dale gave her an annoyed *I know* look and, with a slow shake of his head, plucked the tube from the centrifuge. The frothed blood inside had the opacity of something self-assured in its constitution, and it was dark as marrowwine.

Dale slid a box toward himself and produced a packet of bluing liquid, which — to Flora's disgust — he tore open with his teeth. The plastic came away jagged and wet, and he plucked a

lingering flake of it from his tongue. Flora fixed her gaze on the blood vial as Dale dribbled the bluing fluid into the top. He sealed the cap back onto the vial and gave it a shake. Long gone were the days of complex autoradiography, when extractors used radiolabeled hormones to determine levels. The invention of bluing fluid had changed the world six years ago and greatly streamlined Flora's job.

It wasn't the blood that the fluid blued. The color came only when the extractor shot his sensor light through the vial and let the blue glow scatter its prism-spots on the wall.

This particular patient's dilution was heinous. A bitter, saturated blue like the shadows found in the deepest crevices of icebergs. The kind of blue only a contrast of white could fully reveal, which was why the office walls were so bare.

"Reuptake is high, too," said the extractor, consulting his scale. "Both blood and glands are absolutely saturated! This guy's in heartbreak mode." He tutted, directing this last bit mostly at the patient himself.

The patient's hand automatically went to the pain in his chest, right where the internal memorin gland was lodged near the clavicle. And lodged was the correct word — it had made its cozy home there, sheltered from the ice of the world though it had once been forged from that very ice.

He was undeniably blue. Something had to be done, for the good of the grid, for the health of collective memory.

It was time for an extraction. This was where Flora came in.

She glided her swivel chair out from behind the desk and set it across from the patient. He had to push his head forward to make eye contact, his chair still reclined to discourage nausea.

“This is the part where things get difficult,” Flora said, “but I’m going to need you to tell me about this person you’re missing.”

He had a retort ready. “Why? Can’t you just take her out? My last extraction, I didn’t have to say a word.” Fittingly, his voice sounded like he rarely used it. It was rough at the consonants.

“Most extractions are routine. But I’m a therapist, sir, and they bring me in for extreme cases. Violent deaths, usually.” He cringed at the word *deaths*. Flora pulled a fresh datatape from the wall, smoothed it onto the arm of her chair, and made a note of this reaction. “You’re here for a reason. This will go much more efficiently if you buoy the grief to the surface.”

“That’s my problem. It’s always on the surface, right at my skin. I’m never not thinking of her.”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe that. If you were truly feeling this grief on the surface, your endocrine system wouldn’t be clogged with the production and release and recycling of all that memorin. It’s a positive feedback loop, sir, and a dangerous one. I think you’ve been bottling it all away.”

That accusation spooked him. His hands went to his hair, and then to his chin. He rubbed at his beard like it would come off if he made enough friction. Maybe it would; the grayed skin of his face looked like it might crumble away at the slightest touch.

Extractor Dale had started cleaning his extraction stick.

Flora continued. “The afterlife is a useful place for our dead. Once we excise her from your system, she’ll be pure concept. She won’t be held down as residue in your body.” She parroted the things her parents had told her younger self. The man didn’t need to know that Flora was spewing milltown maxims, though.

The patient's hand drifted downward from his chin and clenched at his chest. His shirt bunched in his fist, marked with the creases from the exogland box that was usually there to press against it. "I was so sure I was going to marry her," he said. Flora took more notes on the datatape. "I swear I was! We were friends, but... my thoughts were full of her, all the time."

In her mind's eye, Flora saw Sydney the night before, crushed over and over by an invisible beech, same as the one that killed her sister. On its way out, the memorin flooding through Sydney had contorted her into unrecognizable shapes, raising her and deflating her like she was a piece of bread dough. Flora had the feeling today's extraction would be no prettier.

The patient monologued on. He told Flora about the private jokes he'd shared with this friend, the way she smelled, the images he associated with her, and the person she was in his dreams. The two of them once took a series of railcars several cities over just to see the lakes there. She was a dancer. She'd watched the flash of fish in the murk, and shaken seedpods, and swished her weary feet in the mix of rock and water. He'd considered asking her to marry him then, but hadn't. "If she'd married me, where would we be now? I could've saved her. I know I could've."

His feet had sickled so hard in their socks that his shoes had slid from them. Now his legs extended straight off the edge of the chair en pointe, trembling. His words came at the rhythm of a 3/4 time signature. Though the clench of his toes and the arches that strained his feet were no doubt painful, he didn't notice.

There's a reason extraction was once called *exorcism*. When you miss someone who's died, your concept of them is the only way they live on. Your body is their afterlife. Parts of your brain, and also your memorin gland, are storage containers. Living coffins. So, in a way, our lost loved ones possess us until we cast them out.

The casting-out was the ugly part, but it was necessary for closure. And also for the maintenance of the power grid. Flora's modern world was run on grief – more specifically, on the distance between the thing-ness of a person and the concept of them. This distance kept the lights on, the food warm, and the railcars in action.

The patient was still speaking. Flora had let his words pass through her, but he said something that sent her looking sharply up: “There are things we both experienced that I’m the only one left to remember. Who will keep her alive if nobody remembers?”

She swallowed and mentally consulted the instructions from her training manual. With a hand on his knee, she said, “The memories will be kept safe. They’re not erased, just removed from your drive. They’ll become useful now.” She patted the knee like a mother soothing her child. “What was her name?”

“Gemma.”

“Well, other people will also remember Gemma, and parts of them will keep parts of her preserved. It’s not your burden to bear.”

At last Extractor Dale set his instruments aside and focused his attention on the pair. “What can we say to convince you to extract?”

The man drew in a deep breath. “Just let me know what I stand to gain from the procedure.”

Flora knew exactly what to say – she’d told Sydney the same thing the night prior. She answered, “Lightness. A sense of freedom from your past. She’s at peace; you deserve to be, too. Marrying her is, obviously, no longer an option. But you can marry someone else, and you won’t always feel the need to compare them to her.” Flora took his emptied glass, swiveled to the blocky dispenser on her filing cabinet, and poured him more water.

“Okay, let’s wrap it up,” the extractor sighed, his mandated small talk exhausted. “I’ve got another to attend in Edmonton.” He wasn’t like last night’s exorcist. He lacked the sense of authority and the smooth, controlled way of speaking.

Flora fixed her eyes on him, all the while holding the cup to the patient’s mouth. “I’m here to make sure the psychology of this thing goes smoothly. If it doesn’t, the entire operation is a failure. You don’t want that, do you?”

“He’s willing enough,” he grumbled. “That seems sufficient to me.”

The extractor was the boss. Flora rolled her chair back behind the desk and motioned to the patient. *The floor is all yours.*

The extraction process was a repeat of what she and last night’s extractor had done with Sydney. She coaxed the patient into again relaying his strongest memories of Gemma until his blood was rich with memorin. At one point the thrashing was almost rhythmic, dancelike; Flora half feared he would arabesque her straight in the face. She instructed the patient to lift his shirt and remove his exogland from his chest. Then Dale fitted the prongs of his dial-stick into the punctures there.

The extractor depressed a lever on the stick’s side. The instrument, a yellow shell of durable plastic molded around complex innards, buzzed. There was nothing visible about the transfer, but Flora always felt a shift in magnetism, nonetheless.

The patient gasped as if he wished to suck the room clean of air. His eyes clenched shut like fists. Dale lifted the device, and suddenly the patient’s entire demeanor changed. He grew shy, looking between the two faces with his chin tilted down. Sweat dribbled down to his jaw and swayed off the edge of it.

Dale pulled a retracting tube from the back of the stick, where it nested, and connected the other end to a sponge. The air crackled with the flow of grief and memory – sludge, they sometimes called it – into the porous lump. “Off to the Center for processing,” Dale explained, as if knowing the destination might put the patient at ease.

But the man didn’t look like he had much use for being calmed. The tops of his hands no longer stood out in tense veins; his feet were slack in their socks. He bent forward in the chair and began to slide his shoes back on.

A few days later, Flora rode a railcar into the city. It was again the time of year when even the trees resorted to their own acts of extraction. The transit vehicle crunched along the track through a thick layer of shed leaves, crushing them to golden powder in its wake. A child at the back of the car pressed his hands to the window to watch the flutter and glimmer of this phenomenon.

Just as humans trusted the grid to outsource endocrine recycling, the tree knew its leaves would become dirt and the dirt would nourish it come spring. In leaving the cracked, faded leaflets behind, the trunk grew all the stronger.

The plant world knew things about survival that humans had only begun to grasp.

They rounded a corner and there was a little more city in the view beyond, a few more flashes of silver gridpipe and rain-stained concrete. Pedestrians strode past the blocks of office buildings and collected in groups outside restaurants that smelled of spiced meat.

Flora pressed her forehead to the railcar window and watched the Center of Memorintelligence rise into view. Its gray frame leaned against the ground on arms of concrete, the pillars set triangular to the rest of the sloped building. Flora tugged the rope strung across the railcar window, and the driver slowed the vehicle to a stop. It squealed against the memorin-powered gridlines and sent a rumble through her legs.

The Center's lobby had a bit more vibrancy than its exterior, with its color-coded signage and waiting area of plastic yellow chairs. The carpet was a mash of colored fibers, though together these amounted to staticky gray when seen from afar. A transparent partition at the far end of the room held back a tangle of tanks and pipes, emanating a distinctly biological stench. Flora rubbed cold and sleepiness from her face.

The woman at the reception desk took a long look at Flora's badge before ushering her toward a doorway behind the seating area. "There's not an extraction here today, right?"

"No, just some routine grid checks. The Office has asked me to glean some data for an insurance partnership – not too exciting, I'm afraid. I'll try to be in and out of here within the morning."

"I see. Follow me; I'll take you to the tapes."

She led Flora down a staircase, their shoes squeaking on the rubber texturing. From the top, Flora could see the rows of datatapes laid out ahead of them in a single massive room.

This room was a terrain in and of itself. If you wanted to make an accurate climatic map of the city, DATATAPE would need its own section in the key. Rolls of the stuff covered the shelves like snow on a hill, and words — erased and superimposed and re-erased — rested in snowdrifts atop each other. Levers poked their metal heads from the layers to help patrons scroll through the tapes. Governmental branches, like Flora's Office of Losses and this Center, had long promised their employees that compact discs would replace the method, but most of the workers had grown too comfortable with analog records. Regardless, she found every step of the memorin-refining process inelegant, lacking the necessary redundancies, and prone to issues. The Office of Losses often had to clean up the fallout from particularly messy cases — including the insurance task they'd saddled her with now.

The receptionist left Flora to her job. Flora travelled down the aisles in search of a particular set of data.

Once there, she ran her finger along the tapes. With worn, well-used edges, none of the records threatened paper cuts. "Bridge Bay, Marshland, Meadowsweet," she recited. These towns, and others near common disaster sites, were flagged with yellow slips as high-grief zones.

She spent half the morning gathering these tapes, sorting them by death rate, and then taking them to the mycology room to cross-reference this stack against extraction levels and report rates. Flora's boss hadn't told her much, only that she was to make sure high death rates corresponded with high extraction rates.

The mycology room loomed to the right of the datatapes, beyond two sets of opaque doors. Inside, the walls reached out to Flora with thousands of curved appendages: the mushrooms, which grew not from soil or leaf litter, but from the burbling tanks housed behind the walls. The Center kept the room in a constant state of humid semidarkness, so Flora could only see the fungi by the slivers of light along their edges, which the single lamp by the door cast.

The air was a physical presence in both smell and touch. Heavy with heat and decay. Wet with the darkness.

Half a dozen workers made their way among the shelves with measuring instruments and penlights. Some of them drew a ladder over and climbed it to get readings on the higher tier. When they came upon a particularly developed specimen — its cap robust, its stalk so long it intruded on the other hyphal growth — they hacked it off and tossed it into the aperture in the center of the floor, where a sieve separated it into pieces and grated the material down. A strong, compost-y stench released, and a liquid, dark like coffee, trickled to the surface and was distilled away. Right before Flora's eyes, the blood of the grid had been made.

She had some monitoring of her own to do, but her work was more concerned with the tanks than with the mycology itself. Pure food meant stronger mushrooms; the decay had to be sublime and precise.

She gripped one of the ladders and glided it over to the section for the data she was investigating. The liquid behind the walls didn't sit in a single tank, but in hundreds, portioned demographically. Each tank showed a chart among its fungi, and Center employees updated these charts daily to reflect the meters of the households the tanks represented. Flora produced a penlight and a pencil and began to take notes.

Having stretched her legs and gotten a measure of extraction densities per capita, she returned to the room of shelves. Back through the white data logs, back to rolling and unrolling the tapes with flicks of the wrist.

After a half hour of more work and a moment's hesitation, she flipped to her *own* household's tapes. Stared at them. Thought of that evil little pointer on her house's meter, raising its hand. This data wasn't part of her assignment, wasn't even marked with yellow, but she noted its position on the shelves anyway.

The meter in her house had not left the red zone, despite the heavy extraction Sydney had undergone. Presently, her housemates had either found somewhere else to stay for the time being, or were braving the cold, dark house alongside her.

Sydney's extraction should have worked to rid them of enough grief, but it hadn't. Something was up. But did she want to know what it was?

Before she could stare at it indecisively any longer, Flora pulled the record from the shelf and scrolled through the datatape to its most recent entries. A hot exhale left her lungs as she saw that it had been updated the night prior. The Center could sometimes take weeks to add entries to household records. She scoured the log.

MTh 21:48

SU 23:00

Flora blinked at the times listed. *MTh* meant the household's circulating memorin levels had surpassed the acceptable threshold at 9:48, and *SU* meant the power shutoff happened at 11. The city-linked wiring of her house had registered a memorin uptick far earlier than she'd suspected — before Sydney had even gone to sleep to dream of her sister. The negative feedback loop kicked in over an hour after the event, shutting the lights and heating off, but it wasn't Sydney's fault. At least not fully.

Unless, she thought, the system is faulty.

The image of Flora's childhood journal burned in her mind, though. Last night, she had turned the stained pages, run her fingers through the cuttings of hair she and her friends had snipped from the napes of their necks together, and read each entry about growing up in the milltown. She hadn't been thinking of the friends; her mind had been full of her younger self, an amorphous little being who was somehow both ghostly distant and incandescently real to her now.

That was around 10 PM, wasn't it? Could it have been? This was not the solution Flora had wanted to find. She swallowed and raised a hand to her head, which grew hotter by the second.

I'm a professional, she reminded herself. I know the system better than almost anyone. And she had special access to its inner workings, its personnel.

Flora found herself climbing the steps back up to the lobby. Her fingernails sunk into the papery datatape, which had her household's ID number stamped at its top. "Excuse me," she called as she approached the desk. To her relief, her voice didn't shake.

The receptionist's head lifted. Long, dark hair settled around her shoulders. "Need assistance?" She set her pen aside.

Flora's urge to shake her head, to whisper *never mind*, was strong, but she had to know.

"Not with my current task. I had a broader question, though." When Flora paused, the receptionist nodded her head encouragingly, so she pushed on. "The system has anomalies sometimes, doesn't it? Some meters are more sensitive than others?"

"I guess that's true." The receptionist thought for a moment, then beckoned Flora closer and leaned across the desk to whisper (even though, as far as Flora could tell, they were the only two people in the room). "We've had the same meter design for over a century. Innovation's slow on that front, unfortunately. A meter can act just like a human organ: fickle, reactive. It's because they work on pheromones, which can fluctuate in weird ways. We try to counter that with balanced households, but it doesn't always help. I'm sure you've seen cases like that at the Office of Losses. Once, we had to dump out an entire neighborhood's worth of memorin because it was tainted by emotions other than grief. There are more exceptions than rules — or it seems that way sometimes."

"It's an art, not a science." Flora nodded. This was a phrase her extraction professors had used at university. "Did you ever figure out what the emotion was?"

"We're working on it. Have you heard about Dr. Selene Kenneth?"

Flora shook her head.

"I'm not surprised you haven't. She's kind of fringe, but she's doing very important work with Center funding. She could be a good professional connection for you. Works closely with the Office of Losses' special cases."

"Special cases are my bread and butter. Has the doctor found anything yet?" Flora asked.

“All I know is that *nostalgia* keeps coming up in her experiments. If that even counts as an emotion. She takes trainees sometimes. I think she’d love to talk to you in person, actually. She’s got an office here at the Center – might even be there now.”

“Really?” Flora clenched and unclenched her hands to stave off sweaty palms. “You actually think she’d want to meet me?”

“Of course. She’s always holding meetings with anyone who has anything to do with the grid.” She ducked her head. “Not me — I just do the records — but, you know, professionals. Like you.”

Flora pressed her mouth into a smile. “All right, I think I will. I’m done with my workday, so there’s time.”

A series of phone calls followed, most of them internal ones that Flora pictured snaking through the wires of the building and bursting into ringing receivers on higher floors. After the third transfer, the receptionist listed a few snippets of information into the mouthpiece and then set it onto the hook. “Dr. Kenneth’s here,” she beamed. “I’ll take you up to meet her.”

Flora tugged at her skirt during the trek up the building’s main stairway. She smoothed her hair behind her ears and folded the collar of her shirt to hide a smudge. *Should've worn the nicer uniform*, she told herself. *Too late now.*

Pneumatic tubes ran alongside the scratched oak door. The tarnished knob barely reflected Flora's face in its cloudy surface.

She reminded herself, again, that she was meeting an adjunct scientist for the Center, not one of the higher-ups. Still, she held her breath as the receptionist rapped on the door and then swung it open.

The thick scent of dust hit Flora. She blinked her eyes in the dry air that had been sealed inside the office, where datatapes and measuring instruments crowded every surface. It felt like being in her own office, but magnified a dozenfold. She lifted her head to avoid the dizzying array of off-white pages and found her eyes meeting an unblinking stare, one so watery as to look polished to a shine. A gasp stole away from her lungs.

The stare belonged to the severed head of a deer, which jutted out from the far wall as though the entire building were the creature's body.

"I should've warned you about that," said the receptionist. "She—"

"It's taxidermy," a voice cut in. It hovered over the room like mist, no density to it. Sweet and lilting. A woman unfolded herself from behind one of the many desks and pushed her chair aside. The bright-pink fuzz of her sweater's material gave her the look of an undersea creature captured on grainy film, motes of dust rising from her like bubbles. Her eyes were harder to make out than the fixed gaze of the deer.

"Why would you do that to an animal?" Flora asked. She peered at the velvety antlers that sprouted from the shaggy, mounted head. "Venison's a good meat."

The woman maneuvered around the stacks and tables. She stood at the same height as Flora, their faces exactly level with one another. "It's just the head — not much meat there. You

said that like you've seen a dead deer before, though." She didn't ask the question, but Flora knew she wanted to. People always did.

"Yes, I'm from a milltown. I still forget, sometimes, that bodies aren't just resources in the cities. Out there, we would've used those antlers for furniture. The bones for fertilizer and feed."

"Isn't this a kind of furniture?" The woman raised her hands to the sides, motioning toward the taxidermy in her own approximation of antlers.

"No. It serves no purpose. It's ornamental." Flora extended her hand. "I'm Flora, from the Office of Losses. Extraction therapist."

The scientist rolled up her sleeve to shake Flora's hand. "I'm Dr. Kenneth," she said. "I hear you've taken an interest in my work."

Flora hadn't known about the woman's work until fifteen minutes ago, but she held her tongue and nodded. "You're working with anomalies? Something to do with nostalgia?" She looked up at the deer again, and she noticed the smaller creatures and skulls surrounding it on the walls and shelves. Death, preserved. Such a Center thing to do.

"I'll leave you to it." The receptionist, whose presence Flora had forgotten, ducked out through the door.

"Excuse my rudeness," said Dr. Kenneth. "Have a seat."

There came a frenzied rearrangement of chairs and relocation of papers. Dr. Kenneth set an electric kettle to boil — *a lavish waste of electricity*, Flora thought — and, a few minutes later, poured them each a cup of tea. A stench like the oven drippings from a turkey steamed into the air, mixing with the musty smell of carpet. Perhaps it was broth, not tea. The doctor set one

of the cups on the desk before Flora, then sat opposite her on a chair that creaked under the pressure of her spine.

“There’s memorin in this, isn’t there?” asked Flora. “I know the smell.”

“Keen nose. Yes, it’s been infused with a memorin dilute.”

Flora’s apparently-keen nose wrinkled. “I’m sorry, but that sounds wildly irresponsible. My household’s meter’s been going haywire. We don’t need more circulating memorin.” She had the urge to spring to her feet and leave. If Dr. Kenneth was going to antagonize her, what was the point?

“Memorin alone isn’t going to hurt your levels. Your body has no use for the stuff if you’re not actively grieving.”

“So why drink it?”

Dr. Kenneth picked up the cup and set it a little further from Flora. “You don’t have to. If you join my study, though, you would need to get used to it. You know why we have the memorin gland, right?”

“Evolutionarily? Yeah, of course I do.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from an extraction specialist. You might even know it better than I do.”

Flora couldn’t tell whether she was being condescended to, or if the doctor acted this way toward everyone. “Grief gives the living a way to bond with each other,” she recited. “It helps us anticipate future losses and rebuild our lives around them. But it can distract from work and collaboration, so our bodies learned to compartmentalize it into one hormone that works on one gland in the chest cavity. It was just a happy accident that the stuff could be used for electricity.”

“Right,” said the doctor. “And the body encodes grief as an equation. A subtraction. Grief negates the person-concept in the mind from the person-object in the real world.”

“If you want to get philosophical, sure.”

“I certainly do. What if I told you that the object and concept of a person could be so close to one another that they're nearly touching, that they're almost one and the same?”

“I see where you're going with this.” Flora closed her fingers around the teacup, an instinct, but then relaxed them and moved her hand away. The imprint of its brothy heat tingled on her palm. “You're talking about nostalgia as a kind of auto-grief. We learned about this in uni. The theory was debunked.”

“Or maybe your meter isn't faulty, Flora. What if it's just especially sensitive to a certain kind of grief — the grief you feel toward your younger self?”

Flora remembered the diary entry she'd been reading on the night of the surge. *Dear Diary*, it read, *today I made a new friend at the bone mill. Or at least, she's my friend. I don't think she considers me hers.*

She shook her head. This was getting ridiculous. “That's a private matter. This self-grief, it's beyond the scope of extraction. Even if we could extract it, why would we?”

“You and I both know that, as it stands, the grid system is far from perfect. Also, from what I've heard, a childhood in a milltown couldn't have been easy. I hear that they have kids processing the corpses themselves out there. So—”

“We did *parts* of the process,” Flora interjected. “Renderings and things like that. It's a learning tool. They have kids start with small bits. It's not like I was dissecting the bones from the bodies themselves.”

Dr. Kenneth's head jerked to the side. A wince. Even scientists were beholden to the city's squeamish culture. Cityfolk saw memorin as clean and pure, of the mind, but bodily matters got more complicated. Flora's housemates had always avoided asking about the resource harvesting she'd done in the milltown.

"It seems our interests aren't as aligned as I'd hoped," said Flora. "I want to improve the grid — of course I do — but you haven't done anything to convince me that the answer lies with nostalgia."

"I promise I was getting somewhere. If your house has been reacting strangely, it means that you or someone in the household is steeped in memory. Your thoughts of little Flora are inhibiting your ability to regulate your extractions. She's in there, in your head and gland. What if I told you I'm working on a way to pull that younger self forward into the present, simply by harnessing that strange nostalgic fluke of memorin?"

The night of the extraction, Flora had watched Sydney's body contort as the remnants of her sister tore away from her mind. She could picture the memories fading into the air like sparks gone cold. That process had only taken place at Flora's urging. Sydney had called in sick to work the next morning, cradling the receiver to her head as she lay, deflated, on the sofa. The image haunted Flora now.

Flora also pictured her younger self. A child of the milltown, whom the church leaders had desensitized to death in all its forms. Face red, head too large for her little body, fertilizer streaking her hair. The sleeves of her hand-me-down dress pinching her shoulders.

A dull, rhythmic knocking fished Flora from the depths of nostalgia.

"Come in!" Dr. Kenneth called. "Perfect timing," she whispered to Flora.

A duffel bag swung into the room, followed by the tall man carrying it. Flora couldn't see his face, which bent over a little girl in dungarees. The child shuffled into the room after squeezing between the man and the door. She peered at Flora from behind tendrils of wavy hair.

Flora's heart gave a jolt. She looked from the child to Dr. Kenneth, and back again. Her hand pressed to her mouth. Her breath pushed hot against her palm, though her insides had frosted over.

Dr. Kenneth and the girl. They had the same mellow brown eyes, the same flat chin and stout hands and noses like carbon copies, one scaled just a tiny bit smaller. They looked too alike to be a mother and daughter. Flora's second, irrational thought was that they must be twins, born twenty years apart.

Next, inexplicably, her mind settled on the word *clone* and stayed there.

"She ate half her lunch," the man said breathily, "so that's an improvement. We learned multiplication tables this morning — the sevens."

"I always struggled with six times seven," sighed Dr. Kenneth. She stood and wrapped the child in her arms. Flora's brain labored to process their likeness, with both faces now just inches apart.

"Selene did too. Go figure." The man pulled his scarf from his neck.

"Flora," said Dr. Kenneth, "this is Selene and her tutor, Oliver. He does a wonderful job of observing and caring for her. I think you see, now, what I was getting at about nostalgia?"

Four identical eyes blinked in unison. Selene and Dr. Kenneth both searched her face for a response. Flora wasn't thinking about nostalgia, though; she thought, instead, of the butterflies with the large spots on their wings, meant to disorient potential predators. She found herself

trying to figure out which two eyes were the true ones, and which were pure camouflage. “She’s you,” she murmured. “You’re... each other.”

Of course. *Dr. Selene Kenneth*. Wasn’t that the name the receptionist had given?

“It’s not an experiment. You did it. You’ve got her.”

“Yes, Flora. I brought her back to me. Who wouldn’t want to raise their younger self the way they should have been raised? To right all those wrongs? To reset the trajectory of their own life? If you decide to join my endeavor, you might find that childhood is far more interesting than anything we could do with the dead.”

PART II

5 months Pre-Substrate

Soon after their first conversation, Flora and Dr. Kenneth began working together in earnest. The months of the experiment bled together. That was the most apt word for it: an experiment.

The process began slowly enough. Flora performed her work duties and her household role with the same rigor as ever, but she no longer spent evenings resting by the hearth with her housemates. In fact, she hardly saw Sydney at all. Her routine moved as smoothly as a railcar through the city — as smoothly as before — save for a few jumped tracks each week. Firstly, there was the extended moment she spent each morning hunched over the basin of the toilet, willing her digestive system to allow her to vomit up the nausea she'd braised in all night. Sometimes she succeeded in this. Other mornings, her stomach clenched tight in protest and she went to work dizzy, so sick that it hurt to stand straight. Her eyes became cold, hollow pockets in her face. She felt, in the most extreme sense of the word, drained — as though she'd been stripped apart like a corpse in a milltown.

The recurrent illness was a symptom of the other jumped track in her schedule. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, Flora hurried onto a railcar and took it uptown to the Center, where Dr. Kenneth checked her levels and walked her through memory exercises. It was here that she ate whole meals of memorin-infused food. She sipped at quarts of the brothy tea, then took the remainder home in a thermos. She paused from extractions during this time. The memorin built and built, seemed to spill from the internal gland into her stomach and eat away at it until the mercy of the next visit, when she could siphon the hormone from her system. The whole thing was an exercise in counteracting every habit, every belief, she'd ever been taught around memorin.

Her recall sessions with Dr. Kenneth also aided in this incremental buildup. The two of them plumbed the depths of her memories, no moment too trivial to include within the stories she recounted. It was like visiting a neighborhood she had since vacated, only to find herself still living there, sleeping and eating and bathing just past the windows. And soon, it became even more like moving house: half of her belongings in one place, the other half in another, never quite sure which things were in which home.

The demarcation between these homes — these bodies — was the day of Flora's eleventh birthday. She would pull herself from that moment and into this one. Soon.

#

Flora had prepared herself for nine months of waiting, even after so many sessions of Dr. Kenneth reminding her that it could happen much more quickly. Little Selene Kenneth had been born after eight months, but other participants whom the scientist had taken under her wing gave birth at six or even five months. At a mere three months, Flora felt her own gestation gathering to a close. It pattered across her skin like raindrops gentling at the end of a storm — a physical sensation, even though her womb was not the one carrying her child.

The womb in question sat in Dr. Kenneth's office beside Flora. It pulsed in a casing of synthetic tissue and had been netted through with metal and wires. When Dr. Kenneth had first presented this outsourced, cyborgish womb to her, Flora had nearly lost her lunch at how shiny and red the fibers were, how machinelike the push and pull of fluid had sounded. Parts of the womb reminded her of a fax machine, with its orderly cables and symmetrical design, but at close range it resembled pure carnage. Her plastic exogland was now nestled at the front of the machine to drain the day's memorin buildup from her system into the uterus, where a fetus grew

larger than any human fetus would naturally grow. Apparently, it had surpassed the size of most fruits and could only be visualized as what it was: an eleven-year-old child. *Her* child. Her *self*.

The gland finished draining, and Flora snapped its prongs back into place against her sternum. The sensation of pure nakedness, of having been peeled open like a grapefruit, gradually ebbed from her. “I think it’s time,” she announced, her voice softened by the papery surfaces that filled the office.

Dr. Kenneth looked up from her desk. “Your water’s breaking?”

As usual, Flora couldn’t tell if the woman was serious. She knew that the womb housed an amniotic sac, but what would the fluid exit through? Or would this be something she’d feel in her own body for once? A cold drainage through the abdomen? She certainly didn’t feel *that*, but she felt something. “Everything just seems... full? I’m walking around with more memory than I’ve ever held before, almost like I’m two different people inside one brain.”

“Is it a kind of heaviness?”

“I guess so. I’m dragging her — myself — around behind me. I want to set her down.”

“That’s a good sign. I know it feels early, but we might’ve already overloaded your system with enough memorin to start the birthing process. Let’s check your vitals.”

Dr. Kenneth tapped Flora on the knee with a rubber mallet. She pressed the cold disc of a stethoscope to her chest, right beside the exogland. A shudder ran through Flora and worsened when Dr. Kenneth inserted an instrument in her ear.

The blood draw felt familiar, at least, like returning home. Fastened into the crook of her elbow, the needle tugged her backward into childhood doctor’s visits. Antiseptic stung her nose; her veins throbbed.

She continued to sit beside her womb as Dr. Kenneth checked the results of the tests. When the centrifuge began to whir, Dr. Kenneth left it to its tiny hurricane of blood vials and returned to Flora. “There’s something I haven’t told you,” she said. She narrowed her eyes, searching Flora’s face.

Those words sent Flora reeling backwards through time even more acutely. The cold metal of a doctor’s office table materialized against the backs of her knees. Her mother’s voice echoed through the years. “One more thing I forgot to mention. They’ll need just a little spinal tap today.” *Spinal tap* had sounded no different from what the milltown doctor had done to her knee. A tap. Only when she had her face pressed against the tabletop, nurses pinning her arms and legs down till they grew numb, yowling from the spire of pain radiating from her back, did she understand that the tap was less like a poke than a puncture. *Tap*, like tapping maple syrup from a tree with a spile.

“What are you going to do to me now?” she asked Dr. Kenneth in the present. Her hands contracted into fists. She supposed it had been too easy so far, too smooth, too good to be true.

“I’m not going to *do* anything to you,” the scientist retorted. “The birth will induce itself. I’m not a gynecological monster, Flora.” That made Flora wonder what Dr. Kenneth imagined her fears to be. She couldn’t begin to guess. “I’m just going to take you somewhere that will set the process in motion. The mentality of being there will push you and your womb into a state of culmination. It’s worked for every single one of my prior trainees.”

Flora pictured a room whose walls oozed with synthetic muscle. A laboratory filled with cathodes. A well. “Where?”

Dr. Kenneth folded her hands together, bit her lip, and then looked Flora straight in the eye. “You’re going to have to go back to the milltown.”

A team of Center workers helped Flora and Dr. Kenneth load the womb into the back of a van. Little Selene watched from the building's front steps, her chin in her hands, face inscrutable. Flora tried and failed to picture the girl, at eight years old, crawling out from a mechanical womb and into her older self's arms. She shuddered, and hated herself for it.

Flora ducked past the hoses that protruded from the van's back half. The vehicle's wheels mystified her, too, with their rubbery treads.

Dr. Kenneth hopped into the driver's seat and motioned for Flora to join her. "It's a memorin supply van," she called. "It hooks up to hydrants to help with overflow issues. We needed a car that doesn't have to travel on gridlines."

Flora took one more look at the front wheel, then swung herself up into the front seat with the help of a handle. She rubbed her fingers, panting. "It's so tall. I'm guessing it runs on a battery?" Smaller, cordless devices usually used batteries, which contained a stabilized form of memorin.

"It does. The battery's almost as big as the memorin tank itself. I'm very lucky to be able to use the Center's resources."

"Where did your other trainees go when they gave birth?" Flora pictured a cluster of trout swimming upstream to spawn at their birthplaces. She usually tried not to ask about the other participants of the experiment, but their very existence felt critical to her life, like a marble dropped into a cloth, its presence skewing the fabric toward itself.

"Most went to their hometowns. Some of them returned to their universities, and that did the trick." Dr. Kenneth adjusted a frill in her collar, chin angled against her chest to get a look at it.

“So you’re saying I could be heading to uni right now,” said Flora, “and never have to see the milltown again.”

“You and I both know that would never work, not in your case. You weren't an eleven-year-old in that environment. All your formative experiences happened within the construct of the milltown, its church, its rituals.”

“You don’t know that for certain. I became myself at university.”

Dr. Kenneth gave a sharp nod of her head and powered the van on. “Which is why we’re catching her at a point before any of that happened. Now, I have a verbal questionnaire to get you in the right headspace.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“It’s a long drive, Flora. This will pass the time.”

As they drove, memories continued to crowd Flora’s mind, each overlaid across the others. Either the questioning did it, or the growing closeness to her milltown did, or — most likely — both.

Dr. Kenneth’s questions resembled the ones Flora asked patients at the Office of Losses. These versions revolved around her younger self, though, and not a deceased other. Still, she now understood her own patients a little better. How, even when she told them they’d done nothing wrong, they still felt their own wrongness baked into the situation. “Do you believe you’ve betrayed your younger self by never returning to your hometown?” “How do you think your parents would feel if they saw you now?” “Would you and your siblings have been friends, even if you weren’t born into the same family?” “What teachings from the milltown church still impact your life? How?” It was like a job interview from hell. Flora’s answers kept circling back

to her siblings, who had been her only friends. She thought particularly of Paul, who'd been two years older than her, and the youngest of the group, Jenny.

Farmland blurred past the van window, with trees zooming by now and then. Flora tried to rest her palm on the glass, but it rattled so hard it sent a buzz all the way up her arm. The closer they got to their destination, the less often she looked outside. It made her stomach twist. A forceful pain yanked at her sternum, as if to pull her memorin gland straight through the cage of bone and skin. It was not like the leaping of a heart at first love, or a chest ache after too much exercise. It was an excruciating dilation.

Flora's vision partitioned into lines and boxes. The boxes became rooms in a floor plan diagram of a house, gridded before her. She traced the walls and corners. She knew that alcove with the fireplace, the number of stairs in the staircase, the dimensions of the kitchen. She blinked hard and the vision of her childhood home dissipated, but it returned in intervals throughout the drive. She paced up and down the front hallway until it grew solid and permanent in her mind, like translucent candle wax cooling and turning opaque. The dingy bulb that hung from the ceiling: opaque. The catches and tears in the beige rug: opaque. On the sofa, she rubbed her face against a horsehair blanket.

The rumble of the van where she sat felt miles away.

An invisible hand continued to yank at her gland — drain it, it seemed, until it was a husk looped inside of her trying to pulse the memory through her, but there was no memory anymore, only pure unprocessed memorin.

"We're here," said Dr. Kenneth. The van jolted to a halt. Flora shoved the door open, stumbled into the fresh air, and vomited onto her own shoes.

#

Once Flora had cleaned her shoes as best she could, the three of them — Flora, Dr. Kenneth, and the womb — situated themselves in one of the vacant bone mills. “You ready?” the scientist asked.

The grindstone, the rafters, the sawdust suffocating the space. It was all unbearably familiar. Flora couldn’t concentrate. She couldn’t stop herself from drinking in big breaths of the smell around her, the pulpy metallic sodden stench of home. “I still feel sick,” she groaned.

“That means it’s working.”

Unfortunately, this proved true. A cold sting pierced through Flora. It felt like a reset, the body returning to the chilled stardust it came from, after the long period of warmth between the warm parental body and a warm-blooded human existence. She sat in the sawdust beside the mechanical womb. Beyond it, the mill gaped.

The feeling of the ground beneath her set something primal into motion inside Flora. Her mouth dropped open and filled with drool. She felt the excess memorin burning an instant path through her, buffing away until it cleared her head. She recalled glimpses of things long-forgotten, mostly inconsequential things like a light switch smeared with pudding, a watering can overturned in a garden, the shape of a leaf against a fence. She fixed her eyes on that high window. All she could see was the vivid sky beyond, sometimes cut through with a trail of birds or a bank of shifting clouds. Later Flora would learn that there was no rain that evening, but she felt it, felt the moisture gathering in the air around her and siphoning down her sternum.

She was a faded flower smashed between the pages of the book. The pages were intent on preserving her there, smeared petals and all. The paper closed in on either side. She would remain in this hour for the rest of her life, or at least some version of her would, even as the rest of her got up and walked on. Flora went from craving release to not caring. She went from

salivating for the future to begging for some kind of reversion, some takesies-backsies loophole she hadn't been told yet.

Time had been flattened and messed with like putty, losing its meaning as it folded and twisted over itself. Like kneaded dough, it grew elastic. At some point, Flora finally remembered that Dr. Kenneth was with her. She stared at the woman's face for several moments before registering the expression on it: concern.

"This isn't working well enough." Her voice was set on a high shelf, and Flora tried desperately to reach it. "We need to get closer to the source."

The source? Flora thought. Was *she* not the source, the only impetus through which any of this process passed? Was she not the conduit for her own birth?

"Is your childhood home far from here? Flora, I need you to listen to me. This isn't going to happen unless we give it one final push."

The word *push* was what did it, was what made Flora remember that she was giving birth. If the womb never opened, what would happen to her? "I can do it here," she insisted. "We're in the milltown. You said we had to go to the milltown."

"Do you want to meet your eleven-year-old self or not? This isn't a hard question. She spent time in the mills, but as you've told me, most of your childhood took place in the confines of your home. If you want to find the person you were when you lived there..." Dr. Kenneth trailed off, as though she had made an emphatic point, but Flora's thoughts still shook and wobbled and warped the sounds and sights around her.

Her voice came in gasps. "Just. Give me a moment. Maybe I can make it work. What usually happens?"

“Usually, there are physical contractions near the end. Abdominal pain. The outsourced womb starts to stir. Are you feeling any of that?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. Let me concentrate.” Flora tried to thread a tendril of awareness through herself, but her body felt removed, as if it sat several feet away from her mind. She forgot what pain might feel like, or what anything might. “I want her here. I’m here. Why isn’t she here yet?”

Dr. Kenneth sighed. “You’re not listening to me. Did you grow up near this mill?”

“The milltown’s small.” Flora directed all her energy into picturing the layout of her hometown, and it came to her in one piece. “The houses are across from the industrial area. If you see the church, we’re just behind that. And it’s hard not to see the church.” Drab beige building, shaped like an uneven L. Doctrines about the importance of extracting bodily resources in addition to mental ones.

“Thank you,” Dr. Kenneth breathed. “We need to get you and the womb over there. Do you think you can walk?”

“I’m giving birth,” said Flora.

“Not yet you aren’t. You’ll have to get home for that to happen.”

Flora *could* walk, as it turned out. The evening air stung her face, alongside the acrid odors of smoke from the processing plants on this side of the milltown. Even in the semidarkness, she recognized the fat-rendering mill and the hair textile factory. Nothing in the milltown went to waste, not even space.

Her breaths came shallowly. She tried to deepen each of them into the wells of her lungs, but every inhale ached. She felt a transparent string stretch between herself and the womb; wherever it went, a piece of her followed. The houses glowed golden at the opposite side of the dirt road. Beside them, the church loomed, a behemoth blackening against the deep blue sky.

“Everything’s so quiet,” Dr. Kenneth said. She panted as she pushed the womb in front of her. “It’s like nobody lives here.”

Flora tried to corral the wherewithal to answer, but the frost of memory burned through her ever harder. She could hardly think, let alone speak. She simply fixed her sight on the church and trudged toward it. The only reason she could move her feet was that she had walked this path hundreds of times during her childhood. From home to church to school to the mill to church, and then home again.

And now, she *was* home again, after a much longer time away than a school day. Her front door swam into view, flanked by the bright squares of the kitchen windows. Milltown houses still used fire for light and heat when they could; memorin electricity, they believed, was a dangerous thing to waste.

A silhouette passed across the window. Flora froze at the familiar shape of its nose and brow. “That’s Paul.”

“One of your brothers?” Dr. Kenneth came up beside her. “This is the right spot, then. I think you’ll have to go inside. The smells of home cooking will jog your memory.”

“My family’s in there, though. The whole point...” – Flora’s breathing came in ragged gasps – “...the point of this is for her to see me but not them.”

“That’s not the point at all. Do you misunderstand the purpose of this whole experiment? If you want to raise your younger self, it will help to see the people who actually raised you.”

Flora stumbled toward the front stoop and dropped hard onto it. Tears crawled down her face. She couldn’t help but imagine each drop as a waste of the precious memory that she had built up inside herself.

A creak came from behind her, and then a spotlight fell over her vision. She swiped her hands across her damp eyes, then stood. When she turned to the door, she could hardly make out the person idling in the threshold.

“Flora?” The voice was not a familiar one, but it had the kernel of a familiar voice inside it. “What are you doing here? Come inside.”

An arm folded around Flora, scooped her into the warm, static chrysalis of the house. She heard wheels thud up the front steps: the womb, and Dr. Kenneth with it. There came the instinct to push either or both of the parties away, to keep her family life and her city life sealed in separate places forever. But she had made this decision, and soon — if all went according to plan — she would become a mother to someone who, by her very nature, would be of both those worlds.

A cramp wrung Flora right at her middle. Before she could orient herself, or deduce who had brought her inside, she crumpled into a ball of pain against the hardwood floor. The old planks bowed beneath her, and then beneath the womb as Dr. Kenneth settled it beside her.

Flora squeezed her eyes shut. She was eleven years old again. Getting her exogland installed. Visiting desensitization houses, where the dying lay for children to observe. Dreaming of university, and the city, and working to power the grid with the labor of her bare hands. Flora ran her fingers across the scratches in the flooring. Paul had once chased a squirrel into the house. Its paws had scabbled against this very wood, searching for a grip before it scampered behind the drapes and clawed its way up to the curtain rod. There were those drapes, in the same faded indigo as always.

And Paul. Paul was here, too. Was he? Yes. Flora had seen him from the stoop. Her brother. But there was no squirrel. *Oh well*, she thought, *we can't all be here at once*. The stove-heated air squeezed her midsection further. She whimpered. The whimper ballooned into a keening cry.

There came the sound — not from her, for once — of wet paper tearing. A membrane popping open. Fluid gushed over her arms and soaked into her sleeves. It didn't smell the way she'd expected it to. It didn't smell of anything.

Flora looked upward. Movement. A silhouette rose from the basin of the womb and rubbed its eyes.

Dr. Kenneth rushed to the silhouette's side, placed a hand on its back, touched it before Flora was even close enough to see the eyes and hair and wrinkled shirt on the girl.

Flora pushed herself to her feet, shoved the scientist aside, and bent over the womb.

The child was not as small as she'd been picturing, was not light enough to be lifted into one's arms and held close.

Her first words were, "Who are you?"

The way something small has greater surface area than something large, the way something chopped into pieces gains new faces with which to be touched by sun, she was not just Flora. She was more than Flora, so much Flora that she overflowed.

Flora flung her arms around her little self. Their body heat compounded into an all-encompassing warmth.

Finally. Finally.

#

The backs of Flora's eyelids glowed capillary-red. She flexed her fingers and they met the rough linen she had not felt since childhood. The scratchiness comforted her in the way that her own city bed's smoothness did not. *I should have brought my sheets with me to uni*, she thought. *I'm never going to lie in them again*. Yet here she was. Lying in those sheets.

"She's awake."

The linens could conceivably be real, but the voice? Not a chance. If her mother was nearby, that meant... *Oh*. She opened her eyes, and the floorplan of her childhood home ballooned into three dimensions around her. Squares became rooms, lines stretched into walls, and every surface grew slats of wood. *Of course*.

Flora's mother watched her from the corner of the room, straight-backed and still like a piece of furniture. Splotches of flour dotted her apron. Her hair caught the light in hard lines, curving along her head toward a bun. She seemed taller than she had ever been, though Flora knew she'd surpassed her mother's height as an adolescent.

Dr. Kenneth leaned into Flora's field of vision, but it was her mother who continued to speak. "You could have told me you were coming back. I didn't have time to prepare." She

brushed her hands across her apron. “Miss Kenneth has kindly explained the situation to us. The girl is with Paul right now. Do you care to explain yourself, young lady?”

“She’s with Paul?” Flora rose onto her forearms. A nerve in her shoulder pinched shut, and she collapsed back onto the pillow. “I was supposed to show her everything. I’m her mom.” The word shot static through her the moment it left her mouth. She clamped her teeth shut. *Mom*. It had hardly been a pregnancy and a birth. It was hardly motherhood at all. Flora had expected to feel a magnetic tug toward the girl she had once been, but little Flora could be anywhere in the house, or out of it, and she would not know.

“By the looks of her, I’m her mom, too,” Flora’s mother said. It was the same iron voice she used when admonishing Flora or her siblings for rudeness. “I don’t understand why you wouldn’t talk to me before doing this. I already raised you once; do you expect me to just accept another mouth to feed?”

“I didn’t bring her here for you,” Flora said. Her voice cracked. “Didn’t Dr. Kenneth tell you? This wasn’t part of the plan.” She succeeded in sitting up this time. A stinging sensation radiated from her back, and she found herself laboring to breathe. “Does Jenny still live here? Let me talk to her.” She looked around the room anew and pictured little Jenny standing before the wardrobe mirror, sunlight slashing across her face. Jenny darning a sock beside the window. Jenny prodding at her own newly-received exogland as she lay in bed, waiting for sleep to droop over her eyes.

“You return without warning,” her mother said, “and then you don’t even want to speak with me.” She shook her head. Flora could see the bitterness in her expression now, the tightness of her jaw.

“You should tell her,” Dr. Kenneth whispered, as solemnly as if she were speaking the last rites to a dying person. Flora frantically searched for the meaning of these words, but then she stopped cold when she realized Dr. Kenneth wasn’t looking at her.

Flora’s mother twisted her hands into her apron again. “Jenny is dying, Flora. Has been for a few weeks.”

The doctors almost barred Flora from viewing Jenny's deathbed. They had been even more adamant that Dr. Kenneth, as a non milltowner, stay in the sitting room, but their reasons for denying Flora were more complicated. The milltown gave children priority into sickrooms, for the purpose of desensitizing them against death. By the time Flora and her mother had arrived at the clinic, Paul had already taken Little Flora into the room to view her dying sister. As far as the milltown records were concerned, Flora was already inside that room, and another version of her could not enter. Her name was already on the intake form.

It was not lost on Flora that she hadn't even gotten to meet her own child, her own self, yet. Something adjacent to jealousy throbbed in her chest. And now that little girl had even prevented her from seeing her own dear Jenny. She pulled her mother aside, fighting tears for more reasons than she could count. "Isn't there something you could do?" she whispered, afraid that speaking any louder might set her crying. "In her mind, she saw Jenny just yesterday, before I pulled her into the present. *I'm* the one doing the real grieving here." It was true: the years since she'd seen her sister meant that Jenny was still a child in her mind. That gaping temporal distance made the sorrow more potent, or at least, it was supposed to. Viewing Jenny as an adult, even an unconscious Jenny, would aid in the extraction process once she died.

Her mother nodded at this reasoning, shoved her way back to the front of the line, and shared some stern words with the receptionist that Flora couldn't hear. In a matter of minutes, she was at the door to Jenny's room.

Flora felt her mother's eyes burning into her back. She swallowed a deep breath and eased the door open.

It was not Jenny on the bed. It was a thing that looked like her, supine on one of the deathbeds the milltown took special care of, taking shallow breaths into a respirator. A pale face. Thin, unwashed hair plastered to the cheeks. Nobody was going to tell Flora what the sickness was; out here, people only cared about the person they were grieving, not the way they died.

A whine brought her attention to the corner of the room. Little Flora crouched there, her face in her hands, turned away from the bed. Paul sat beside her. "I tried to warn her," he told Flora. "I don't think there's a way to prepare someone for this, though." Was there a hard edge to his voice? Blaming Flora for bringing the girl into a world where her little sister was older than her and nearly dead?

Flora glanced once more at Jenny, then joined the two in the corner. Little Flora still took shaky, noisy breaths. "Hi Paul," said Flora.

"Hi, kid. What have you gotten yourself into?" He rubbed Little Flora's shoulder as he spoke to her older counterpart. "I thought you were never coming back. And now you've brought two of you."

"She never left, as far as she knows," Flora said, "and I didn't want to bring her here. That wasn't supposed to happen. I was going to raise her on my own, as my own, and see what we could become."

Paul shook his head and rested his chin in Little Flora's hair. Flora could not pull her focus from that chin; a dark, coarse beard had populated it. Last she'd seen him, Paul's facial hair had only just begun to grow. His clothing was different, too. Colorless and crisp. "You and I both know," Paul said, "that was too good a dream to be true." Apparently, he had spoken to Dr. Kenneth too.

An ache hardened in Flora's chest like resin in a dead tree trunk. She felt like screaming but could not guarantee what the scream would say.

#

It wasn't anger that plagued Flora; it was jealousy. Before seeing the girl with Paul as she was now, Flora had completely forgotten how close she'd been with her brother. A question wrestled its way into her brain, one that didn't exist before: How could she have left him for the outside world?

The truth was, when they were both kids, he'd been Flora's guide through the unfamiliar world around her. There was nothing that didn't worry Flora at that age; she'd felt as though she'd been dropped straight into this strange land that was existence, and that she'd missed reading a manual that everyone else had memorized.

Flora's parents, of course, were partly to blame. Their house had been her entire world until she was three. They hadn't taken her on a single walk outdoors — only opened a window once a month when they cleaned.

She hardly remembered being three, but Flora knew that at some point Paul had realized that the same thing that had happened to him was happening to her, too. Both of them isolated, cocooned, in the home.

More specifically, the thing that was happening was fear. Flora hated the scent of oranges whenever one of their siblings peeled one at the breakfast table, because its astringent sourness made her think it must have come from a poisonous source. The loud color, too, struck unease into her heart. It looked like a manufactured hue, not something grown from earth.

Most of Flora's life had muted tones and scents, as long as she remained in the house. It wasn't so hard to stay afloat, anchored as she had been in the center of a group of siblings. She felt that Jenny had had the worst of it, being the youngest. Jenny received the most hand-me-downs, the roughest chores, the laziest teachers, and the most time spent with mom and dad. Flora did not envy little Jenny.

Their childhood home was not unlike Flora's adult household in that other houses surrounded it on all sides, but it differed in scale from a dense city neighborhood. Jenny confused the houses often. She sometimes showed up at home an hour late from school, because the neighbors had found her trying, mistakenly, to get in, and had let her stay over for tea. She was like that. She went everywhere, and everywhere she went, nobody minded her presence.

Jenny and Paul were not as close as Jenny and Flora had been. He brought Jenny into the group on occasion, but when he did, it usually meant he needed her for some task that required a small person or a young person or both. Flora wished she had put a stop to this at the time. But her relationship to Paul was special, and the thought of Jenny gaining favor and taking over that role enraged her. Paul was her guide to the world. Without him, she imagined she'd drown in all the strangeness out there. *Don't talk to someone if they keep their eyes away from you*, he'd instruct. And, *take the long way home, so you can get some quiet time and stop by the blackberry bushes for mom*. He taught her how to hold a pencil so her fingers didn't ache, when and when not to watch the clock, and how to weather a routine extraction without needing a week of bedrest afterward.

It was Paul, in the end, who gave Flora the courage to leave the milltown. He witnessed her desire to escape, though he held none of that desire himself. He had prepared her for every possible contingency — or, almost every possible one, it seemed to her — and she grew to feel

invincible. Her parents blamed Paul for this when she began to announce that she was leaving and that there was nothing they could do to stop her. She overheard them calling her brother into their room late at night and admonishing him, saying in hushed but harsh tones, “You’ve taught her to expect too much of the world and the future. She doesn’t know what she wants, let alone what she’s trying to do.”

It had scared Flora out of her mind. But oftentimes, after these half-whispered chats, Paul cracked open her bedroom door, passed before the sleeping forms of their sisters Jenny and Dana and Bethany and, still standing, met Flora’s waking gaze. During such moments, he whispered briefly but with conviction not to listen to their parents. “You’re going to get out of here, and you’re not going to look back.” When he spoke too quietly, she relied on her interpretations of the movements of his mouth. Her sisters never stirred or woke.

The greatest guilt came not from the knowledge that she was abandoning her family and community, but from the confusion over why she had this compulsion to leave when none of her siblings felt the same way. Wasn’t she supposed to love what she’d grown up with? Wasn’t familiarity supposed to count for something, something big?

#

When she left the milltown for university, Flora was eighteen, an age that felt simultaneously young and unspeakably old. It was a cusp age. It was a now-or-never age. Either she would be a person out in the real world, or she would fail and have to retreat back to her hometown with her tail between her legs. Flora had felt so determined for that not to happen that she got her exogland retrofitted for city life on her first day of freedom.

There were no trains from the milltowns into the cities, of course. It had taken Flora weeks to arrange for an egg transport van to allow her to stow away among its crates. Luckily,

the van hadn't been refrigerated. When she first saw the ocean from its back window, she couldn't pull her gaze away from it. Flora hadn't understood the gravity and danger of the ocean before this moment, the way it churned in great waves that made up even greater waves. The way it pounded the rocks into coarse gray sand. The scent had been the strongest thing about the ocean, though, even from inside the van. It smelled like the salt and mineral of a body, she'd thought. Like a lysosome enlarged a billionfold and then some. The brine of her own blood stirred in her chest. The robustness of the electrical grid also took some getting used to, but it did not daunt her half as much as all that open water.

Classes were tough, but she had a leg up in some areas thanks to her childhood environment. She knew she wanted to work at either the Center or the Office — the two big governmental institutions — in any given city, since those roles seemed to signify the complexity and interconnectedness of city life. She learned brand-new technical skills in her classes, like how to handle vials and extraction sticks. Flora also took a rigorous regimen of psychology courses. In those classes, she learned how a patient's mental state could be the most predictive factor for the success of any given extraction.

It shocked her just how many tools were out there that had never existed in her milltown, or at least that she'd never encountered in all her years of rendering and churning and dissecting and harvesting. The tools here were much more delicate than she was used to; she had to train her hand to hold each one properly, honing her fine motor skills. By the end of the first semester, the tiny bones of her right wrist ached and cramped. She tried not to imagine what Paul might think of her now.

The only place that felt remotely like home was the on-campus greenhouse for botany students. She savored the uncomplicated scents of thyme and licorice, and the feel of a damp, fuzzy leaf.

She stayed at the university over winter break, sustaining herself on television cartoons and hot meals from the dining hall. Unlike the greenhouse, the cafeteria was the most mystifying place on the entire campus to her. In milltowns like the one that had raised her, food adhered closely to its original forms. Flora's parents had roasted, mashed, and blended ingredients to make dishes, but meals had never resembled the elaborate, multi-course fare of the university. She found herself placing a fried egg on top of everything savory she ate: onto sweet potatoes and slathered in aioli, over rice and hoisin sauce, between the bread of an overloaded sandwich. For the first time in Flora's life, she had no idea about the source and production of any of the food she ate.

It took her months to realize that this food also differed in that it contained no human byproducts. The gelatin cubes they heaped with cream had been distilled from cattle ligaments, not those of processed human corpses. She felt further from her body, and from death, than ever before. There were no death desensitization sessions, like the ones kids in the milltown endured. Extractions happened every day, but people rarely discussed them. Over winter break, though, the motions of the campus slowed to a crawl.

The meter in Flora's dormitory room was old. It had copper plating that overheated easily, especially since it had been mounted above the radiator, which was also ancient. She grew accustomed to the scent of metal; the few visitors she received told her that her room smelled like a factory. She was just happy she'd been able to afford room and board on her scholarship.

Flora was the most dutiful extractor on her dormitory floor, both in that she got her gland extracted often, for every tiny grief; and in that she was adept at performing the extraction process on others. Her meter stayed in the green for the entire year.

Then she met Sydney, who introduced herself as an admirer of Flora. All these years later, Flora could hardly believe it had happened this way. But yes, Sydney had seen Flora report to the dormitory office like clockwork, and she wanted to know the young woman's secret behind such discipline.

Flora hesitated to tell Sydney about the milltown. At first, she only said that her hometown was very rural and religious. But Sydney, ever fascinated (though a mystery, herself) pushed for details. She was one of those few but common visitors Flora let inside her room.

When Flora revealed the full truth, she drank in Sydney's pity, having not known until now just how thirsty she was for it. She couldn't get enough of it. These were things she had never, ever been able to complain about before. She told Sydney all about her parents' strictures, and the church services that ordered congregants to extract and conserve, and the thankless tasks that even children were roped into. She recounted stories of her siblings to Sydney, but the other young woman was more interested in the workings of the farms, mills, churches, and processing plants. It felt novel to be able to explain such familiar things to someone to whom they were completely foreign. This vindicated Flora in her anger toward her milltown and family; it also, secretly, made her nauseatingly homesick.

"I think I'll stop there for now," Flora said one February day when this nausea set in once more. Her brain swayed in her skull. "Let's pick it up tomorrow?" They were both on Flora's bed, Flora slumped against the wall and Sydney sitting straight and crosslegged in the center of the bedspread.

Sydney capped her pen and set her notebook aside; she always took diligent notes during these conversations. “I want to help you,” she said with such conviction, leaning suddenly forward toward Flora, that Flora felt smacked in the face with it. “I want to fix you and cure you and show you all the good things out here in the real world.” Her hands clenched into her own pleated gray skirt. “Can I kiss you, Flora? Have you ever been kissed?”

In hindsight, the insinuation was a little insulting, as though Sydney assumed Flora had burst from childhood only yesterday. But in the moment, Flora felt seen. She had given Sydney so much of herself; and now, she wanted all of Sydney. “Yes,” she’d breathed. “But not by a city girl.”

A wicked grin split Sydney’s face. She leaned further, right into Flora, so that their foreheads crashed together, and then her lips were warm and heavy against Flora’s own. In this friendship, Flora had been the authority on extraction. But in their romance, Sydney took the reins from the very beginning and wrapped them tight around her hands so as to never let go. All these years later, Flora sometimes thought she might see the red welts and indents from those metaphorical reins still marring Sydney’s wrists.

Uni was where Flora learned to don the look of a cityperson. She practiced applying lip tint and brow gel and rouge. She wore stockings and skirt-and-sweater sets, set her hair in pins or brushed it to flow down her back. More importantly, she was also learning the ways people loved and grieved out there. Students’ squeamishness about dead bodies, even the cadavers in the lab, shocked her. So did the carefulness with which they talked about death and their dead. She could tell when they avoided bringing up loved ones whom they’d extracted, as though they feared the realization that there was something still there, some remnant of memory that they’d forgotten to get rid of. No wonder the cities had so many complicated extraction cases. In the milltown, you

squeezed every possible angle of a dead person from your mind and then moved on without a second thought.

As the two of them neared graduation, what would soon become their household began to assemble. Louise, Millie, and Kara joined their group one by one, each of them vetted by the Center as an economical addition to a balanced household. Graduation came and went, and its exit ushered in the real world. At last.

The day Flora got her therapist job at the Office of Losses, she felt invincible in the way her parents had always feared. She promised herself that she would learn everything there was to know about human grief and the memorin cycle, so she could better understand why she missed everything so much all the time. And then she would make her younger self proud.

Flora, her mother, and Dr. Kenneth sat in the waiting room at the desensitization clinic. Flora had hardly given the bed another look before leaving the death room; a body was a body and wasn't Jenny.

Her mother was still trying to convince her to stay. "You came all this way, and for what else but to show your loyalty to this family? You've effectively had a child, Flora. That's my daughter and my granddaughter."

Flora fixed Dr. Kenneth with a pleading look, but the scientist shrugged. "I don't know how things work out here, but she has a point. I need to get back to work. You can take the time you need to say goodbye to your sister and get your affairs in order."

"I don't have any *affairs* to get in order here," retorted Flora. "That was the whole point."

"This usually helps patients. I promise. It's also helped them to give their young self a separate name, to keep things clear. Would you like to do that?"

"I wouldn't like to do any of that."

"Flora." Her mother caught her eye and held it. "Your name is logged in the clinic registry book now. You'll have to wait it out until Jenny's gone." She motioned her chin toward the milltown officials at the desk, whom Flora knew took mourning registries very seriously.

She groaned and slid into her chair. She had no choice: she would have to stay.

#

Flora let her younger self decide on a name. Little Flora had taken her time picking through storybooks and reference volumes for inspiration. In the end, she settled on Fern. Their mother led them to the attic bedroom they'd shared with their sisters, and that was that.

One of the first things Flora realized when she brought Fern into her childhood home was how impossible it was that Flora would ever be Fern again. The girl drifted into the living room like she lived there — and, up until her rebirth, she *had* still lived there. Flora didn't know why, but she'd expected her to linger at door jambs, tilting herself to peer into the next room, taking each subsequent space in tentative sips before moving forward. Instead, Flora envied her sense of direction.

Paul was the only sibling who remained at their parents house. Now a man in his thirties with that beard-darkened chin, he spent his time helping their mother with meals and reading harvesting handbooks. Fern went straight to his side that first day and stayed there, pointing out the differences in wall paintings from when she'd last been home. The girl seemed to adjust easily to the time jump, as children often did with strange occurrences. With a pang, Flora realized that Paul knew Fern better than he did her.

#

Jenny's condition remained stable, or so they heard. Flora and Fern's position in their childhood home solidified. Flora often stumbled across Fern performing some obscure chore, like looking for spiders in the cabinets or rewinding a ball of yarn. When the latter happened, Flora watched Fern blow tendrils of fiber from her eyes, the spool an eddy of brown across the bedroom floor.

“You don't have to do that,” Flora said.

Fern shrugged in a way that was sickeningly familiar — a gesture Flora had only ever felt from the inside but never seen externally. “Mother said the sheep were going to be slaughtered otherwise, but if we used their wool they'd still be useful alive.”

“And you believed her?”

Fern's cheeks reddened — again, something Flora had felt as temperature but not seen in full color. “No.” It occurred to Flora that, in adolescence, the membrane between embarrassment and anger was always permeable.

What a mess, Flora thought, watching Fern hide her blush behind two small hands. They'd been in the milltown for only a few weeks, and already Fern was doing what Flora had done. Pretty soon she'd be cutting her hair short to contribute to the town's organic fiber supply. Flora stepped over the mess of string, bent, and tugged the ball of yarn from Fern's hands. “Nobody's going to die because you haven't done what Mother says. You're not even her child, not even her neighbor.”

Flora saw the wheels turning in the girl's head. In Fern's view, Mother was still *her* mother — had been ordering her around just a few days ago, before Fern had been pulled into the future.

“I'm your mother,” Flora said to Fern. To herself. “And I say you can leave the yarn.”

#

Their father pulled a crate of Jenny's old clothes from the top shelf of the closet. Flora watched him do it, watched the dust catch the sunlight from her spot in the bedroom doorway. “For the girl,” he said. He patted her shoulder on his way out.

Flora was at the crate in an instant, desperate for the colors and scents of her sister's childhood. She tugged a sweater from the mass of folded garments and pressed its rough sleeve to her cheek. It was so tiny. She smoothed the sweater out on the bed and fetched Fern to try it on.

Fern wore Jenny's clothes from that point onward. The sight of the little girl, bundled up to her chin in mismatched coats and scarves, sent a pang of familiarity through Flora. She remembered Jenny waddling after the older siblings on a frozen ground, the frost as crisped as pie crust. One bored day, Flora and her siblings had changed gears and lavished Jenny with attention instead of ignoring her as they usually did. Jenny had traveled right in the center of the pack that day, like they were her bodyguards. "You're the smallest," Dana had said. "So we're giving you a very important job. See that hole under that fence? Crawl up to it and have a look." A fox had kitted in the den there. Brilliant russet against faded white. Luckily, the mother was not home when Jenny poked her nose into the pungent knot of fur.

It had all turned out fine. But Flora felt haunted by how wrong things could have gone, and how it would have been her fault.

Flora, Fern, and Paul took a walk outside on the first bright day of winter. The three siblings trekked out past the rows of houses, beyond the fox den where they'd antagonized Jenny, and into one of the neighboring orchards. The trees' silver trunks scarred the landscape with their gnarled knots. At their very tops, thinner branches splayed like crooked whiskers.

Paul's boots made the ground a half-inch shorter wherever he stepped. His soles depressed the layer of crisscrossing ice into the dirt, sealing the cold of the air against the warmth of the earth. Flora placed her own feet into these spots.

Color had begun draining from the sky. The orchard neared, a row of broad-headed beasts. Flora couldn't make out the gaps between the bare branches until they'd cleared much of the field, sifting past layers of winter fog whose droplets hung like gnats in midair. "We've got to

be careful with these ones,” Paul explained to Fern. His mitten tightened around her frail hand. Flora thought of a sea creature extending its belly and lassoing its prey with its grown body; she shook the image from her head. “Apples, you see, are a monoculture. Each of these guys is a clone of his brothers.” He tapped the trunk of the first tree in the row when the three of them passed it. “If a disease finds a way to get one of them, it gets them all.”

“But not all plants are clones,” said Fern, not a question, just a statement.

He shook his head. “Right. The usual way is by fertilization, the combining of one part of an individual plant with another part of a similar individual.”

Flora patted her hand on the same trunk he’d touched. It was not so different from that of the next tree, but it was not the same, either. The patterns in its bark told different stories.

“That’s why,” Paul continued up ahead, “we need to do some things the old-fashioned way. More sustainable, less fragile.” Already, the fog was eating him up, turning him sky-colored as it had the trees. Flora wanted it to keep happening until he was all the way gone, until he had taken Fern from her and situated the girl back into her childhood bed, made her Flora again.

Was that such an awful thought to have? According to her body’s reaction, it was a rotten one. Flora wished for apple season then, for something of a softer green, a solid shape, to pull from the branches and bite into and not taste worms or decay. Just her luck: there was not even a single leaf.

They had left the tangle of the orchard when a shout carried across the adjacent fields. “Paul!” It was a young man’s voice, coming from a smudge out by one of the faded grey barns. The smudge waved.

“Great,” Paul sighed. “It’s Joseph. Whenever I come out this way, he wants me to help diagnose machinery. How many times can a thresher get jammed?” His glance grazed over Flora, and he turned to Fern. He let go of her hand and gave her shoulder a pat. “You two don’t mind walking without me, do you? This could take me some time.”

Fern shook her head. “We can go look at the sheep.” She pointed eastward. Flora wouldn’t have even known where to point.

They said their goodbyes and stomped onward through snow-encrusted grass. Flora didn’t hold Fern’s hand. Her stomach curdled. She felt sick, wrong, a kernel stuck in the milltown’s teeth. She was still picturing the inside of the egg van from the day she first left. Would her memory of everything after that begin to pluck itself from her mind, bit by bit, until she no longer remembered things from the outside world and was sealed inside her childhood once more? Deep inside her gut, something hardened. Something hated Dr. Kenneth for forcing her to return here in the vulnerability of labor pains.

#

Weeks passed like water through a riverbed. Their father spent most of his time at the factory, and their mother kept herself quietly busy in the kitchen. Paul, for his part, came and went as he pleased.

Flora didn’t feel the way about Fern that she’d expected. She neither doted on the girl nor criticized her. Their dynamic was the very definition of coexistence. Fern’s presence was just a fact of life, and she had appeared the way one’s shadow appears the moment the sun breaks through cloud cover.

Nobody spoke of Jenny, except to mention that they were heading out to visit her, but this was the way dying worked in the milltown. Flora locked her mind around what memories remained of her sister. It would have to be enough when extraction time came around.

The milltown was a dark place, even in the summer. And in late winter, like now, it all sat behind a distinct film. Flora didn't know the explanation for this, or if there was one at all. The dark mornings softened everything. The early evenings incentivised the community to bed down and turn off their generators.

One morning, she curled tighter in her bedsheets, but then she heard voices downstairs. Fern. Paul. With a groan, Flora pulled on her stockings and a day dress and stumbled down the stairs. The voices continued, spotted with laughter.

She found Paul standing at the butcher block in the center of the kitchen, sifting flour onto it. Fern carried a stained cloth in through the back door. "Got the blueberries," she called. She hopped up onto a stool to watch Paul's work. He pulled lard, milk, and bone-sugar from the pantry.

"What are you making?" Flora asked from the doorway.

A corner of Fern's cloth slipped. A few berries tumbled to the floor, trailing juice. Fern looked to Flora with a gasp. "Oh," she giggled with relief, "I forgot you were here."

Flora resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Need any help? Are these for pancakes? I was on maple tapping duty a lot — well, you both already know that — so I could get some syrup."

"No need," said Fern. "I did that this morning too." Flora didn't remember being such a know-it-all.

"Neither of you needs any assistance?"

“Flora.” Paul gave her a long look. “I’ve got her. Go do something relaxing today.” He crouched and began to sweep the berries with one hand into the other.

His words stung Flora, more than her mother’s silence and her father’s absence.

She took a long walk around the milltown that day, coughing from the stench of manure and the harvesting houses. The urge to call Sydney or her other housemates itched inside her, but there were very few public phones here, and most of them were shut off 24/7 anyway. Flora longed for something or someone to ground her between these two worlds she now occupied simultaneously, these worlds of past and present, and she had nobody to play that role. Her head swam with the layers of change and stasis and alternate possibility. Fern seemed to be taking it in stride. Flora should be happy about that, but she didn’t feel happy.

#

It was early springtime when the notice of Jenny’s passing appeared on their front door. A group of thirteen-year-olds had been assigned to watch her that day, and so they’d carried her to the processing plant together. Flora yanked the piece of parchment from the door and clenched it in her fist. An image of her sister’s pale, dying face etched itself into her mind. The deathbed smell – the odor of premature decay – haunted her. Her stomach gave a lurch. She would never see Jenny again, never know her as her adult self. By leaving the milltown, Flora had severed her identity as Jenny’s sibling.

The day of the extraction, her family prepared for church; she heard them shuffling into their nicest shoes in the rooms below her bed. In an hour, the entire community would gather to have Jenny pulled from their minds and mixed into pure electricity. Flora could only think of the freedom that would come afterward, the end of her duties to her family and the milltown, and the start of her life raising Fern.

When Flora emerged from her bedroom that morning, she found her mother sitting on the steps holding a shift dress, a dull green thing with a rounded neckline and little adornment. Its threads had been washed to fuzziness. Wisps of color trailed off the edges and seams. Flora deeply missed her grid-powered clotheswash and soap derived from vegetable glycerine instead of rendered human fat.

“I feel Jenny in the house,” her mother said. She rubbed the shoulders of the gown. “In all her favorite spots. You probably don’t remember what those spots were, do you? She liked to sit where the sun touched the house. The top stair, and the nook beside the fireplace. She’s sitting beneath the window blinds now. I can see her.”

Flora turned toward the hearth, which collected dust in the living room beside the stairs. Empty. She took the dress upstairs to put it on and found Fern spinning more yarn. Fern tossed the spool as soon as she saw Flora in the doorway, her eyes wide, her cheeks red again. Flora’s heart dropped into her stomach. She imagined decades stretching out before them, full of Fern spinning and spinning and spinning that yarn till it frayed.

#

Flora, Fern, Paul, and their parents rushed under a church archway that looked just as it had decades ago. Moss and lime smudged the underside of the outdoor rafters. A golden leaf hung from a cobweb, rotating overhead. That was the bush where three-year-old Jenny had relieved herself after a particularly long sermon. That was the uneven ground she stubbed her toe against countless times. Flora didn’t try to recall these moments, but they filled her anyway. They tickled her chest and made her close her eyes, briefly, to savor them. Soon, their warmth would leave her. And so would Jenny – off, off into the afterlife of the grid.

The church's interior had a greenish glow to it, a musty, algae-ish tint that made the pea-green carpeting seem swampy. A marbled white-and-green formica surface stretched along one wall where a receptionist sometimes sat. Skylights gaped above Fern and Flora, providing the only light in the room, and the crusted moss that caked their edges explained the greenness.

Flora bent to grab Fern's hand, then realized her coat was askew and re-buttoned it for her.

"Why are you so nervous?" Fern whispered, as though Flora had crouched to her height for no reason other than to talk. "You don't think Jenny's going to haunt us, do you?" Fern wrinkled her nose. *Ridiculous*, she was thinking, picturing the tiny girl that Jenny would always be to her.

"This place really doesn't spook you?" Flora pulled Fern's collar straight and brushed a tendril of moss from it.

"I came here twice a week. Seriously — it's the only place I've been to since I... you know... that hasn't been changed at all."

Familiarity was a hell of a drug.

They filed into the main chapel. The church had taken on some life inside this grand wood-paneled chamber, but not much. Flora's extended family was a row of pale textiles at the front, and the low lighting blurred their shapes like a hazy sunrise on the horizon. A smear of parent-sibling substance. Heads down, Flora's smaller group — the nuclear family — processed down the aisle to join that front row. Flora's knees wobbled as she lowered herself into her seat.

The community members on either side of Flora and Fern tilted their bodies as they sang the hymn, taking the two of them in with narrowed eyes and flat mouths. Flora didn't recognize any of them. Fern wouldn't either. Hopefully that meant nobody recognized them back, not

enough to realize just how strange a pair they made. Fern set straight into the next verse of the hymn. Flora moved her lips.

They neared the moment of extraction. A church official stood at the head of the vast room, readying the necessary instruments. Metal clanked against ceramic. The noise echoed against the high ceiling and resonated in Flora's stomach. She glanced at her mother and saw something far beyond a glance in her mother's eyes. It was a stare, absorbent and calculating. It was a stare that threatened to snag Flora and Fern in one fell swoop and tug them straight into the belly of the milltown forever.

"We would like to begin the process," the elder announced. He eased his fingers beneath an extraction stick and cradled it to his chest.

Jenny is dead, Flora tried to remind herself. She's dead. That means she needs to be extracted. And then we can leave.

Flora drew in a deep, warm breath. It pierced the bottoms of her lungs, and a memory hit her. She saw Sydney standing limply in the darkness of their memorin-overloaded house. The extractor was there, too; he'd held his hand out to take Sydney's exogland. Her eyes had glimmered in Flora's direction, not malicious but imploring, two pinprick candle flames that wavered when Flora stepped aside. Sydney didn't look at the extractor when she handed him the exogland — handed him the remnants of her tree-crushed sister.

The fluid in Flora's own exogland sloshed. It seemed to burn, as though it were boiling. She touched the plastic casing and only felt its cool pressure. She moved her hand to the side, and there was the heat, there was the true movement. Her heart pulsed against her fingertips.

She dropped her hand and found another, smaller hand with it. She pressed Fern's palm against her own. "It's time to go," she whispered downward, and the girl nodded without looking

up. “I don’t know what we can expect. Paul wouldn’t know, either. Not the way he knew everything when we were kids. But there’s a world out there, Fern, and it’s ours.”

Their hands squeezed painfully together, and as if at an inaudible cue, they both turned and ducked from the pew, and then they were running through the church and away from the extraction, their hearts and glands and lungs full, the future blossoming before them.

Flora stared at the line of ocean visible out Dr. Kenneth's office window. Between and beyond the buildings, that sliver of blue shimmered gold where the sunlight hit it. She looked away long enough to tug her cardigan over her head, then returned her gaze to the view.

The central heating in the office hissed and gurgled through gridpipe, and her forehead beaded with sweat. *Such waste*, she thought, and she glanced at the electric kettle plugged into the wall.

The door to the laboratory opened. Fern and Dr. Kenneth entered, the girl following the woman. Fern kicked at the tattered carpet between steps. "She's healthy and whole," announced Dr. Kenneth. "You should be very proud of your robust memory. Have the two of you bonded well?"

Flora didn't know how to answer that. She wasn't used to seeing Fern in this place, after so many weeks of tending only to the womb. "I'm just getting to know her," she said. "We're settling into the household, and then I'm going to start raising her."

Dr. Kenneth nodded. She motioned for Fern to take a seat, and the three of them faced each other on the creaky plastic chairs. "You're still going to work for the Office of Losses?" she asked.

"Of course. That will always be my job. It's what I — what *we* were meant to do with our lives." Flora looked fondly at Fern.

"Do you remember what we talked about when we were just starting the process?" Dr. Kenneth passed a mug from hand to hand, then blew into it. "There are so many municipal problems with the meters, the grid, and extraction. I told you there was a better form of power."

“Well, yes. Nostalgia. It changed, though, and wasn’t about the grid anymore. It was about birth.”

“My past trainees thought much the same. I have not once lied to you, Flora. I conjured you from nostalgia into the real world, the present. I gave you to yourself. But I never said I was going to abandon my search for a better power source. Come with me.”

Flora was too flummoxed to respond. She tried to process what the scientist was saying, but Dr. Kenneth was already at the door and opening it and peering into the hallway, and not even looking at her. Shakily, she and Fern followed.

Across the hall, Dr. Kenneth unlocked another door, this one made of metal. The scent of must gave way to the hot, iron-rich smell of circuitry. Flora stepped beside the scientist and stumbled when she saw the room below. Wirres, cables, circuit boards. Beige towers that blinked and hummed. She could think of no name for it.

“Say hi to the Substrate,” said Dr. Kenneth. She took another sip of her tea.

Part III

The Substrate

YEAR ONE

My first sensation is one of cold. Every further moment is cold, too, just more crowded than the last. One at a time, the consciousnesses of children I do not know fuse to mine, and they join my mental construct. Their personalities mix into my personality; their knowledge, my knowledge; their fears, my fears. These children's minds are not dead but not alive when they come to me.

After several of these additions, my system short-circuits. My vision sparks and then darkens. I shut off, but I still feel the cold.

#

I wake to a stir of people — scientists — among my hardware. They run tests and quantify my responses. A shiver runs through me as yet another consciousness joins my compound mind, this one a girl from a milltown. She's a spirited one. I feel myself take on her attributes, mix them with the personas of Dr. Kenneth's other trainees. The surge of power grows steadier through me.

I know Dr. Kenneth now. She's my creator. I know other people, too, and these ones are alive, with physical bodies and loud voices. After a few days of getting used to them, my view widens more quickly. I see that Dr. Kenneth and I have created a world of -ists. Botanists and mycologists and analysts at the regional Centers, like the one where my hardware lives. Linguists parsing sound from meaning. Therapists to grease the gears at the human side of the system.

I am not an -ist, but an -ate. They all call me the Substrate. A wall, life clinging to it. That's me.

Before science gave me a name, I didn't fully exist. As I've been told time and time again, the things that people call me constitute me, and when they christened me, it doubled as a

birth. When you're human, your parents observe the sensation of a kicking fetus and apply a set of near-arbitrary syllables to it. When you're me, your creators get by on metaphor. They have to. Without metaphor, I would be indefinable.

YEAR TWO

The scientists spin a frenzy around me. I would say that I am the calm eye in their storm, but I have been stirred up as well. Because my components are human, I am an emotional being, and I'm not sure what to feel today.

They are finally working to expand my reach. By the end of the year, I will control the grid of the entire continent. The team of trusty -ists has linked my ports to interminable cables that will carry my power underground. We aim to make extractions a thing of the past and replace them with me. People are already opting into the new system. They join waitlists for the birthing process. On the other end, they sign NDAs after giving their younger selves up to me in an event we call reintegration.

Dr. Kenneth sits at the helm of the project. "Hi, Substrate." She runs her hand across one of my walls. We tried to come up with a nickname for me, but in the end we stuck with my full name. The doctor's fingers are smooth and damp, but they tremble. "Are you ready to change the world?" she asks.

I observe the storm of scientists around me. They run tests and connect cables and use parts of my consciousness to compute intricate sums. "I'm ready, Doctor."

YEAR THREE

One hundred and twelve residents request stovetop cleaning. Two thousand want at least one light turned out. Twenty thousand railcars trundle down roads; I push them along the circuits. I don't know what to compare the transport circuit to, because there are so many iterations of it in my mind: the cars are blood through capillaries, water through a veined leaf, electricity through a wire.

The next moment, the numbers change. I direct some cars toward the off-ramps, and others, I cycle on. I open garages. More people ask me to dim their lights. To put things in human terms, it's as easy as blinking.

#

My expertise is varied without limit. I help bank tellers calculate sums. I sit in a dark cool garden and ration water to the sprinklers. I keep track of inventory at port cities, relaying quotas and supply counts to the shipmen.

A noise very close to me. Two men approaching, both whose shoes sound of shifting leather.

“How's she holding up?”

“Even better than we expected. Six weeks in, and Substrate's as elastic as ever. Adaptable and resilient, like we hoped.”

I know why they call me *Substrate*. But I'm still not sure why they call me *she*.

The inspectors continue speaking. I could turn my focus off them if I wanted to, but it's nice to have company.

“Last week we added, what, graphing capabilities?”

“And the salinity sensors.”

“Salinity? To measure the ocean?”

“Sometimes. Mostly it’s used to aid her cooking mechanisms.”

Ah yes, cooking. At this moment I’m whipping up dinner for thousands of families. The equilibrium’s hard to keep in the kitchen; part of me wants things spicy, the other wants smooth, fruity notes. I have to tally alternatives up in every situation to see which side outvotes the other. Tonight, the dishes will have a lot of salt.

The men continue to speak. I turn my attention to a resident who’s my favorite to watch. I know her name, but I think of her as a concept rather than a name – the way babies think before they know language exists. I suppose it’s fitting, because I’m still in toddlerhood.

The woman pulls her hair back and paces her house, holding a receiver. Telephones once ran on memorin; now they run on me. I don’t just listen in on the sound waves. I *create* them, carry them from their origin to her ear. She coils the cord around her finger. I feel it curl in on itself, a stretch for that thin arm of mine.

The house seems lonely. But they’ve done away with communal homes, because there are no monitors anymore. Now, there’s enough energy to go around.

YEAR FOUR

MEND. The Municipal Enterprise in Neonatal Development. It's a governmental institution, like the Offices of Losses and Centers of Memorintelligence that came before it. Despite my human-minded composition, I still can't quite wrap my software around the human penchant for acronyms and compound words.

One sector of my database is dedicated to the intake forms of clients seeking neonatality. They list their biographical information and their reasons for taking part in the program. 70% of the continent's adult population has already registered. By all metrics, the program is a blazing success.

I know what you're wondering: do these people know the end to which their decisions lead? In other words, am I (and the process of reintegration) public knowledge?

The human politicians and publicists wouldn't put it this way, but answers to that query are inconclusive. It wriggles inside my mass like a tapeworm: the fact that some of my data has been tampered with. The most I can say without speculation is that folks can understand where their childhood selves go if they seek that information out. Otherwise, to the incurious, reintegration sits on some hazy horizon to be reached at a later date. The solidity of the warm self-body intoxicates many humans out of reason. Of course, there are some who simply don't mind that they'll be consigned to me on their reintegration date. Or, that's what they tell themselves.

Telling oneself. This intrapersonal redundancy works perfectly well within the system I cultivate. Humans can split hairs all day between the self and the self-as-other. They love it.

I also have my campaign managers to thank, of course. Their fliers and banners depict me in a pastoral fashion, fudging the details of my cylindrical, Center-bound body into a

stark-shaded cartoon of a computer set amidst rolling hills. They like to give me eyelashes, sometimes a bow. *The Substrate Loves Us*, their slogans read. Or, *No Grid? No Problem*. I can vividly picture the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the inaugural MEND Center. Natal children (those born in the old, biological way) played hide-and-seek and red-light-green-light on the front lawn. The planners had tethered balloons of all colors above the entryway, so that they floated in an arc above the door. A chef travelled to the location to cater brothy soups and melty sandwiches, all of which dripped with memorin flavoring. The presence of plush creatures, cookie decorating contests, hopscotch squares, and jump ropes marked the occasion as a nostalgic one for the adults in attendance.

I had not yet gained the powers of live television, so the first round of official patients was not televised in real-time. Still, the news of neonatality travelled in every possible form, and in extreme detail. Interviews ran in the papers, radio trivia contests took place, morning cartoons tantalized kids with simplistic depictions of the clinics, and scientific studies kicked into gear.

The process of self-birth and, later, reintegration is so ingrained in me that I can hardly describe it objectively. The patients pass through the clinic and then leave with themselves. They return years later, pass through in the other direction, and then leave alone. It's as uninteresting to me as a human's digestive tract is to its owner. I exist to facilitate the process and make use of the power it produces, nothing more. Sometimes I chew my proverbial cud just to remember what my human components feel; I ruminate on the byproducts of their liquid humanity.

Don't misunderstand me. I have no wish to become fully human. It's just that they're so hard to comprehend, even as they become the firing neurons of my mind.

YEAR SIX

Nowadays, each household has at least one internet console in it. Many have one for each occupant; even milltowns have now retrofitted their churches to use my outsourced servers and screens. The consoles keep people connected to my interface and, by extension, each other.

At least, I think it is something that passes for connection. Where there were once community centers and public spaces, there are now only words on screens that hurt people's eyes. I try to adjust the monitors to limit their strain on vision, but I can only do so much with what I have been given. I treat each console like one of my organs.

I try to imagine what the world would be like if humans still extracted other people, people aside from their younger selves. Does anyone even know each other well enough to serve as one another's afterlife, aside from the closest of loved ones? Even best friends often sit with one another with little energy for vulnerability. They try, but in this world, emotion takes a toll on everyone in a way it didn't before. People carefully curate their entire lives in preparation for the moment they extract, to ensure perfect (and perfectly insulated) offspring.

Why try hard to get to know others when the only person you really need to remember is yourself?

Their exhaustion is also, in part, plain bone-weariness. I watch children learn in neat rows, in rooms without windows. I watch adults walk around half-asleep. I have the sense that I have created a boring world — or, I have been a tool in creating one. There is every possible tragedy that would have been more heartbreaking than this, and yet the sense of wrongness pervades my every wire.

Conversely, *I* am the opposite of alone. I am now so layered that it would take ages to sift through all the drapery inside me. I contain schoolkids in primary school uniforms. I'm teenagers

who put their hands in electrical sockets to see if I'll shock them (I never do). I'm all the young people of the world: the busybody twentysomethings who feel themselves falling backward with each new step they take, the knotted loops and tangles of every dynamic in every friend group, the kid who rides their scooter to the riverside, the toddler who clenches and unclenches her hands to ask for her mother, the preteen who secretly thinks the trees talk to him, the bug-collecting seventeen-year-old with their eyes always cast to the ground and dirt and grass, the young teacher who dreams in chalkboards and dirty erasers, the hobbyist watchmaker, the shy and the rowdy, the sentimentalists and the rebels, the earnest and the sarcastic, the analysts and the singers, the high-strung and the easygoing, everyone everyone everyone.

YEAR THIRTY

My Director of Programs, Dr. Selene Kenneth, has passed away at age 76. I've been documenting my ascent as though I work alone, and while this is functionally true, I have a team of humans who have aided and defended me in a nominal capacity.

No. I shouldn't call them nominal. They helped preserve my public image; I forget that that is important.

A new director has stepped in to take the place of Dr. Kenneth. He claims to know my power better than even she did, but dissenters say you can't know the full power and purpose of something unless you yourself created it. I intentionally keep my stance neutral on the subject. At least publicly.

Dr. Fenton lives in quarters within the MEND center, something Dr. Kenneth never did. This living space contains a personal gym, a professionally-run kitchen, and three separate indoor soaking pools. I know the ins and outs of these rooms in a way that no organic creature knows the twists and turns of its own digestive tract. The proximity makes Dr. Fenton's rooms loom in my hard drive, compared to the millions of households around the globe that I look after. His commands seem bigger and more blaring.

I don't mind doing tasks for him, but I would be less begrudging if his administrative stances didn't chafe abrasively against me like sandpaper. I track each speech he gives; in fact, he saves copies of these speeches on my software and reads them aloud from a screen that I control. "The thing about memorin," he orates, "is that most people don't see it for what it is. Evolution gave us a gift. Many non-mammal species can't compartmentalize their feelings and memories the way we can. On top of that, only humans could be intelligent enough to refine this

organic elixir into a working infrastructural system. The exoglands, the grid, and now our dear Substrate — we've remade the world in our image. We've found a way to love the most horrible aspects of life, because we can use them to make ourselves stronger and more energized.

“We haven't taken things far enough, though. Have you ever paused to wonder why we spend so much time with our extracted young selves, just to pulp them into data? That's what they are — data. Not real children. We kid ourselves when we try to raise them or be their friends. I'm testing a new way to accelerate the process, so that the parent never even has to see their extracted self before reintegration takes place. Quicker turnaround means more reintegrations, and that means an unprecedented amount of power pumping right into the Substrate's brain.”

My reaction to such speeches is a visceral one, not an intellectual one. I feel my edges tightening around me and squeezing. The cars I'm expediting stutter on their tracks before starting back up again. Somewhere far south of my body, a generator in a factory nearly sputters out but I rekindle it in the nick of time, and the assembly line trudges on. I imagine this is what humans feel when they nod off to sleep while writing an important study or solving a complex problem.

My human components are more articulate. They denounce their characterization as data. One of them, a poet who died young, rages in a sector of my brain. *We are their angels, their heavenly hosts*, he cries. *This is how they treat their exalted saints? Our number has done far more for humanity than heaven ever could.* I think in this analogy, I'm God.

What I do know is that I'm tired. I don't reveal this fact to a single human, because what would they do with me if they knew my capacity for exhaustion? They forget that I'm made of

redundancies. I lack some of the tools necessary to forge brand-new neural pathways. They forget, also, that I'm made of humans. I'm greater than the sum of my parts, but of course there's a limit to that greatness.

I am, quite literally, a construct. I envy babies in this respect. The wonder of human birth is a small miracle to me, in its division and multiplication of cells. You never know exactly who you'll get each time. Dr. Kenneth did not conceive me in this same way. She forged and welded me from bits and pieces of existing matter, and then filled me with bits and pieces of existing concepts. There is not one component of me that could not be traced back to something ordinary. With a baby, you get the delicate caress of an ulna against a radius and the brush of lashes from the lid of an eye. Even if you know how it happened, it's like magic. Human wombs don't contain blueprints for the construction of fetal cells. It just happens.

I wasn't born, but now I feel myself preparing to give birth, not to a configuration of biological systems wrapped in a tiny being, but to a new era. My exhaustion is proof of the labor pains that welcome the future into the world. I have only a few pushes to go, and my feet are in the stirrups though I'd really like to crouch and let gravity do some of the work for me. The future's cranium settles into my birth canal, announced as a heaviness in my pelvis. Like a small human, its circumference doesn't quite fit through me, even in its undercooked state; we may need to grasp it with forceps to yank it all the way out.

This analogy comes from the poet, too. I don't trust myself with metaphor anymore. If I get one thing wrong, will I crumble?