

Probably It Will Not Be Okay

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**Abstract**

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Why was I so caught up in the “real story”? So certain there was something to be told. So certain there needed to be something holding things together. Where does this desire come from, the desire to impose meaning or narrative on something that resists such impositions. The desire to create a center when something has no center. A threat to our understanding, or, more, a threat to our ways of understanding. I don’t want to assign meaning to what I’ve written. I don’t want to say: J and N are searching for home. I don’t want to say: J and N are trying to remember something they have never had. I don’t want to say: J and N find belonging in desolation and being separated from other people. None of those are what I was writing. But in a way, all of those could be things that I wrote.

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**Probably It Will Not Be Okay**

**Breka Blakeslee**

## Now

The alarm goes off for the second time. N reaches around J, hits the alarm, sits on the side of the bed. J hides further under the blankets. A gray morning.

We have to get up, N says. You have to go to work. I have to pick up the dog.

Fuck work, J says into the pillows, Fuck the dog. Fuck you.

We don't have time for that, N says.

N goes out to the kitchen, starts making coffee. There are strange sounds in the living room. N pours two mugs of coffee and carries one into the living room to see what's making the sounds. It's a baby.

A baby is strapped into a car seat in the middle of the living room. It's watching dust particles in the air and making odd noises. N stares at the baby. The baby stares at N. Then the baby goes back to looking at the dust.

Come look at this, N says.

J stands in the doorway behind N, takes the coffee.

I thought we agreed not to have kids.

Where'd it come from?

They look at the baby. The baby looks at them. The baby cries. J passes the coffee to N and picks up the baby. The baby stops crying.

Aw, look at it. Can we keep it?

Is it house broken?

N goes back to the kitchen, sits at the table. J sits at the table, holding the baby.

Where do we report a found baby?

N shrugs. They drink coffee.

What am I supposed to do today, if they don't believe the dog was lost?

Make it convincing. Take this baby.

We don't have a baby registered.

They both look at the baby. The baby cries. N takes the baby from J, pushes up its sleeve, looks at its forearm.

This baby isn't registered.

J finishes drinking coffee, gets up.

I have to get ready for work. We have to leave. Everything's going to be fine.

J kisses N, then kisses the top of the baby's head.

Don't do that. It's not ours.

It's not anybody's. And it showed up in our living room.

J goes into the bedroom.

You can't be thinking about keeping it.

N follows J into the bedroom.

Really. We can't keep it.

The baby is still crying. J is getting dressed.

It's probably hungry. Do we have milk or something?

Just creamer.

Try giving it that.

J grabs a bag from the floor, keys off the dresser.

Look, I'm sorry, but what else are we supposed to do? It's not registered and you're already listed and now they found the dog. If we report it, one of us will probably disappear.

Now let's go.

N puts the baby in the car seat, grabs the dog's papers from the counter. They get in the car and J drives to the city. J and N don't talk. The baby cries. They reach J's office.

We'll figure it all out tonight.

Right.

Try not to make problems.

Right.

The car door slams and the baby stops crying. N looks at the baby. The baby cries again.

\*

N tries to hold the baby like someone used to holding a baby, but the room is cold and the minor official is making N feel uncomfortable. The baby is making the minor official feel uncomfortable. The minor official doesn't get many babies in the office. The baby is crying and hiccuping. N pats its back and bounces it up and down like N's seen people do with babies.

I know losing a pet is painful, the minor official says, And I don't want to make it any more painful for you. But illegally disposing of bodies is serious. It gets people listed.

I'm already listed.

The minor official grows more uncomfortable.

Yes. Well. Make sure you file the proper paperwork this time. And if you know who might have buried your dog, contact us. I just need you to identify the body.

Of course.

An orderly rolls a cart covered in a plastic sheet into the room. Under the plastic sheet is the dog.

N looks at the dog. It looks worse than it did when J and N buried it last week.

Yes, N says, That's our dog.

If you could just sign here? the minor official says.

\*

N waits in line at the city exit with a baby strapped into a car seat in the front seat, and a dead dog wrapped in plastic in the back seat. The security officers look suspiciously at the car, but once they see the baby and smell the dog they wave N through.

Make sure you file that burial report correctly, one of them tells N.

Right, N says. Thanks.

If you don't, they'll send you to the middle of nowhere next time.

The officer is leaning against the car, one hand on the roof.

Right, N says. Thanks.

Just file it correctly, the officer says, still leaning against the car, And there's nothing to worry about. Not like those feral cats. Always got to worry about them.

The officer laughs. N laughs.

Right, the officer says, smacking the top of the car, Have a good one.

N drives back through the gray countryside with the unregistered baby wailing in the front seat, and the illegally disposed dead dog smelling in the backseat.

\*

It's night. The baby is in blankets in a box. The dead dog is in plastic in the garage. N and J are in bed but awake.

A burial permit is expensive, J says, And the burial spot is insanely expensive.

J doesn't say that they can't afford it because N isn't allowed to work now, but they both know that's why.

You can't pull any strings?

I used up all my favors at work, J says.

J doesn't say, because of you. J rolls over and puts an arm around N.

But I was looking at burial permits, and I think we could forge one pretty easily.

They've flagged the file. They'll be waiting for it.

Yeah, but they won't check at the place itself. Not for a dog.

What will we do with it, though? It didn't work last time.

The baby grunts in its fake crib. They are silent.

How do you think they found it?

I don't know, N says, The same way they found out about me. The same way they'll find this baby.

The baby cries.

\*

It's late evening. J is driving. N is in the passenger seat fooling with the radio. The baby is in the backseat. The dog is wrapped in plastic and tied to concrete blocks in the trunk. They've been driving for a long time and the smell of the dog is seeping through the trunk and into the car. The baby won't stop crying. They stop at the check point. A security officer walks to their car.

Evening, J says, and passes over the forged burial certificate.

N tries to look like someone on a family outing to bury a dead dog. The security officer looks at the paper, hands it back to J, asks something. J can't hear because the baby is crying. The guard shrugs and waves them through. They pull away from the booth and N turns up the radio. They pass a mansion with a giraffe in the floodlit front yard eating the topiary. They reach a picnic spot by the river. J and N look at each other. The baby stops crying.

I need a fucking cigarette.

They climb out of the car. The baby cries.

Christ, J says, and lights a cigarette.

J passes the cigarette to N, unstraps the baby from the car seat, takes back the cigarette, tries to rub the baby's back with the same arm that is holding the baby. N lights a cigarette. J sits with the baby at a picnic table shaped like a stegosaurus while N gets the car seat out of the car. They leave the baby in the car seat on a slide that is a brachiosaurus tail while they get the dead dog out of the trunk. Something drips out of the plastic wrapping. They drop it on the ground and finish their cigarettes. Clouds cover the moon then scuttle off, hiding and showing the wide-eyed faces of wooden pterodactyls and velociraptors.

Let's check out this river.

They walk down to the river, leaving the baby in its car seat on the slide. They walk along the bank until they find a place that looks suitable. They can hear the baby making almost crying noises, so J goes back to the playground and carries the car seat down to a log at the edge of the water. N and J go back to the car and pick up the dog again. It's too hard to carry the dog and the concrete blocks at the same time, so they untie the concrete blocks and carry just the dog to the river, then N goes back for the concrete blocks. They tie the concrete blocks back onto the dog, and wrap more rope around the plastic and the blocks just to make sure. Then J wraps duct tape around the whole thing, too.

Its ear is sticking out.

J tapes the ear to the plastic with more duct tape. The baby watches. J and N pick up the dog and fling it out into the river. Their throw is bad, and the dog lands close to shore. One of the concrete blocks sticks out of the water.

Fuck, J says, and lights another cigarette. They share it.

Water's fucking cold.

Fuck.

They finish the cigarette, then take off their shoes and socks and roll up their pant legs. The baby watches them. They wade out to where the dog is sticking out of the river. It's hard to pick it up because the current is pushing it under. J slips and they both fall and lose their grip on the dog. It sinks. N helps J stand up and they look at the spot where the dog disappeared.

Stay this time! J shouts.

They wade back to shore. The baby is still watching them. N lights a third cigarette.

Don't smoke, N tells the baby, It's bad for you.

\*

It's morning. J is at work. N finishes feeding the baby, opens a beer, and tries to figure out what they should do next. A long time passes. N drinks more beer, then calls J. Instead of J's voicemail, there's a pre-recorded message:

The line you have reached is no longer in service, please check the number and dial again.

Fuck, N says.

The baby laughs. N turns on the laptop and tries to connect to the internet but their network is unavailable.

Fuck, N says again, and opens another beer.

When J gets home, the baby's sock is hanging out of its mouth and it's crawling under the coffee table after a beer can and N is sitting on the couch drinking beer and watching porn using an illegal internet connection. J picks up the baby and closes N's laptop.

Look, J says, but isn't sure what to say next.

At what? This shitty house? Your disconnected phone? Our disconnected internet? The fucking baby?

J doesn't know what to say to that.

Shit.

Yeah.

We have to leave, don't we?

Yeah.

J looks around the shitty living room with holes in the floor and mildew on the ceiling and the empty dog bed in the corner. J finishes N's beer.

It'd help if we could get a fake registration for the baby.

We can, N says.

\*

They leave the baby in the car. They leave the car in the darkest place that seems like a safe place to leave a baby. They skulk through back streets to the side door of the office where N worked before being listed.

You're sure H is working tonight?

Yes, N says, which is sort of a lie. Help me climb onto the dumpster.

J helps N climb onto the dumpster. N looks in the window.

Shit.

A cat climbs out of the dumpster and rubs against J's legs, purring.

What's up?

The cat hisses and scratches J's leg.

Shit, J says, and jumps.

N knocks on the window. The cat meows. Another cat joins it.

H is in there, N says, But not moving.

Sleeping?

I don't know. Do you have a screwdriver?

Hang on.

J finds something that can work and passes it to N. N pries the bars away from the window, unlatches the frame, slides into the room. J waits outside, watching the cats. The cats watch J. Two more cats climb out of the dumpster.

Fuck off, J tells the cats, but the cats don't do anything. They sit in a semi-circle around J's feet. N's face re-appears in the window.

Can you climb up here on your own?

You can't just open the door?

It reads thumbprints.

Can't H open it?

Um.

N disappears, reappears in the window a few minutes later.

Yeah, stand by the door.

J stands by the door. The cats stand by the door. There's the sound of something being dragged on the other side of the door, then the door unlocks, opens. J slips inside. Cats slip inside. J trips over a body.

Get up. I have to make H close the door.

J gets up quickly. The body is soft but cold and not comfortable to lie on.

Give me a hand with the arm?

J helps N push H's dead thumb against the thumb pad. The door locks. N sets H's body down against the wall and rifles through H's pockets.

What are you looking for?

A key card. Otherwise we need H's thumb to get anywhere. Why are there cats in here?

They followed me in.

Do we have a knife?

Why?

I don't want to carry H through the whole building. We only need a thumbprint.

No.

Would you rather carry a cadaver?

N opens a drawer next to a microwave by the sink.

Think this will work?

N holds up a steak knife.

You're crazy.

Yes.

N starts sawing off H's thumb. It takes a long time to saw the thumb off with a steak knife, but they manage. N washes the thumb off in the sink, then puts it into a plastic bag from the drawer under the microwave.

What if someone comes?

No one is going to come. H is the only one on the night shift.

J follows N out into the hallway and through a couple of high security doors — using H's thumb to open them — and into the cubicle where N used to work. N sits at a computer, punches in information, and the printer spits out some pages. N takes the pages.

We can go.

That's it?

That's all I did last time.

It didn't work that well last time.

Yeah. So I'm sure it will work at least that well this time.

They go back through the high security doors and the hallways and into the security room. One of the cats is curled up on H's back. Two are licking up the blood at the stump on the side of H's right hand. Another is chewing on H's ear.

I guess we don't have to worry about anyone wondering what happened to H's right thumb, N says.

Fuck, J says.

They use H's right thumb to exit the building.

\*

Their old apartment sits on the edge of the city empty. No one changed the locks after they were relocated, so it's easy to get inside. J feeds the baby rice cereal and the baby smears it into its hair. N takes things out of a large bag and places them on the kitchen counter.

How long do you think we have?

N takes a bottle of rubbing alcohol and another of whiskey out of the bag.

At least today. Probably tonight. Maybe tomorrow.

N lays a packet of razor blades and a roll of gauze next to the rubbing alcohol.

It depends what their reason is: the dog, the baby, the forgery. You haven't done anything else have you?

Not yet. You?

I've been the model citizen since you were listed.

They laugh, because that's a lie. N takes tweezers and plastic gloves from the bag and puts on a pair of the gloves.

Ready?

Wait.

J opens the whiskey bottle, drinks. N drinks.

Ready?

J takes another drink, grimaces, and puts the baby in its car seat. J and N sit crossed legged on the floor. N pulls up J's shirt sleeve and rubs alcohol along J's forearm. It doesn't take N long to cut out the small piece of plastic with J's registration on it. It's something N's done before. J sits still and holds a gauze pad in place while N washes off the tweezers and razor blade. J isn't as experienced at cutting out N's registration, and N winces and swears.

What do we do with them now?

I don't know.

They drink whiskey and look at the registration chips.

We could break them.

We could leave them here.

Frame them and hang them on the wall.

Throw them in the river with the dog.

Don't disrespect the dog.

They laugh and so does the baby. They both reach for the whiskey bottle at the same time, laugh again, and kiss. The baby stops laughing and cries.

Fucking baby.

N breaks into a neighbor's internet and finds hypnotic music videos for the baby to watch. Then, when the baby is sleeping, J and N drink the rest of the whiskey and watch porn and fool around a little and fall asleep. But they do remember to set an alarm.

\*

N wakes up staring at the baby's face while it hits N on the head.

What? N says.

The baby drools on N's face.

You're disgusting.

N reaches for a shirt. It's J's shirt, but N puts it on anyway. The baby smears snot across its cheek.

Wake up J. The baby is filthy and we have to leave.

My arm hurts.

I know. My head hurts.

I know.

The baby crawls around the living room and tries to eat pieces of the carpet while N and J get dressed. Then N climbs down into the alley and J hands out the baby, then climbs out the window and they walk to the car.

Do you want to drive?

J pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

Light?

N lights J's cigarette. J inhales, exhales.

Thank god.

N lights a cigarette.

Where's the baby going?

Under the car.

They watch the baby lick the back tire. N puts the baby in the car seat and finishes the cigarette.

They get into the car and leave.

## Before

It's N's birthday and H and the rest of the security department from work are throwing a party. N isn't thrilled about it but it's easy to get allowances for birthday parties. H and the rest of the security department from work are not N's favorite people, and when N gets drunk N says things that shouldn't be said. The bar here is great and N wants to get drunk and leave with a stranger. People keep showing up, friends of friends and friends of those friends. N decides the party needs to end soon. One of the friends of a friend's friend is J. N checks out J from across the table. J sees, and smiles, and N acts like it was a mistake. N decides the party needs to end with N bringing J home. H stands up and proposes a toast, and then every other member of the security department stands up and makes a toast and while everyone is toasting, N slips off to the bathroom. Walking out of the bathroom, N runs into J.

Hurry and get back. The wait staff is going to bring you cake and sing, J says.

Fuck.

Want to get out of here?

Fuck yeah.

They sneak out of the restaurant and drink in an alley after curfew, hiding from the patrols, and then finish getting drunk at N's place. By the end of the night, J knows everything the security department can't know, and by the end of the year they've bought a dog on the black market and more or less moved in together and are talking about registering as a couple. N doesn't really hang out with the security department anymore, which bothers H a little, but is probably safer.

\*

There's still a hint of a chlorine smell despite the layers of dirt and piles of leaves and trash.

There aren't many trees in the city, but there seem to be leaves everywhere.

Last time I was here, I startled up a whole colony of cats.

Are they still here?

Probably. But they live in the rooms off to the side, so we're okay in here.

N leads the way down the short ladder into the empty pool. The sun is weak, so the light that usually filters through the high, broken windows isn't there and the pool doesn't have any of its usual mystery. It's just an empty pool filling with debris.

As long as you promise we're not about to get attacked by cats, J says, taking N's hand.

They walk slowly along one of the long black lines on the pool's bottom. J counts out the feet as they walk into the deeper end.

Four feet. Six feet. Eight feet. Ten feet. Twelve feet.

They stare at the edge of the pool above them, at the bottom of the diving board. N lies down on the grimy pool bottom and pretends to do a backstroke.

I don't actually know what a backstroke looks like.

J laughs and sits on N.

No horseplay.

They make out in the deep end of the pool under twelve feet of evaporated water. A cat stands on a diving block and watches them, but leaves them alone. They laugh at their own gasps magnified by the empty room.

\*

The room is dark, small and overly warm. There aren't that many people, but it is crowded. It isn't clear what the meetings are about, but they are anti-government which gets N excited and J finds that sexy. Every fifteen minutes or so N looks at J and J looks interested in what's being said until N looks away. From the way everyone in the room pairs off and slips away in the end, it seems the only thing the meetings accomplish is getting everyone excited to have sex with everyone else. One night everyone gets so inspired that they don't even bother to leave, just have sex in piles of people in the windowless room.

\*

They are doing what they do most nights: skulking around the streets until after curfew then heading back to N's place. They walk through the dark streets, sharing a flask and smoking. A patrol is heading up the street and they hide behind a statue of a raccoon. J pulls N close by the belt loops so they are both covered in the raccoon's shadow but also so they can kiss. They stay hidden in the shadow long after the patrol passes, until a tailless rat or a guinea pig skitters out of the shadows and into the storm drain by their feet. It's followed by a cat. There's scuffling, a screech, and then the rat or guinea pig climbs out of the storm drain, shakes off, and scuttles back into the shadows. N kicks a glass bottle against a wall, grabs J's hand and they run. They run until they are panting and sweaty. The night feels colder now.

Almost there, N says.

J laughs because N's place is only a few blocks away from where they started, and they wandered pretty far. They get into the building the back way, just in case the alarms were fixed. They sneak past the giant anteater chained to the dumpster, climb up the fire escape and push open the fire door that never fully closes. There are leaves and empty cans in the hallway, and it's hard to walk quietly but they try to be silent until they reach N's door. The apartment feels even smaller than the last time they were there.

When's your lease up?

Two months, N says, searching through the cupboards for something to eat.

J sits on the couch and watches.

We should register for cohabitation and you can just move in with me officially.

Or, N says, coming over to the couch with some stale crackers and a half empty bottle of wine, We can register as a couple and apply for a new place together.

J is surprised and tries to hide the surprise but fails.

You didn't think I'd want that, did you?

It doesn't seem like your style.

Well, N uncorks the bottle and offers it to J, It is. Now.

J drinks the flat wine and eats a stale cracker and can't stop smiling.

You know what else we should do? We should get a dog.

We should totally get a dog!

\*

Once, when I was younger, N says, I stared down a patrol. They sent me to a program that was supposed to make me want to join the patrol, but instead it made me think it was stupid.

Once, when I was younger, J says, A patrol drove right past me and didn't even see me. After that, I started staying out too late.

Once, I was trapped in an alley by feral cats. I sat and stared them down until a porcupine distracted them and I escaped. Then I stopped being afraid of cats.

Once, I skipped community class for the entire quarter and no one noticed. Then I stopped caring about community.

Once, I protested the protests. A morale officer saw me and forced me into the youth brigade. I never went to another protest.

Once, I lied about my registration number for a year on all my forms. I'd gotten some numbers mixed up. But it didn't matter, and now I lie on purpose.

I always lie about my registration number, N says.

\*

The warehouse is empty. Industrial metal platforms reach the high ceiling. The aisles are wide enough for a patrol to drive down. Their voices reverberate off the rusting beams. Pallets are tumbled across the floor, stacked on the platforms. A forklift lies on its side in the middle of an aisle. N climbs on top of it, balancing on one of the tines.

Don't fall.

Will you catch me if I do?

You'd knock me over if I tried.

Would you at least cushion my fall?

J laughs, lights a cigarette. Something moves in the shadows. N jumps down from the forklift, falls against J. J drops the lit cigarette and it rolls across the concrete leaving a trail of sparks. They fuck next to the forklift, until J's head hits the metal guard bars.

Do you think you have a concussion?

I think I have a fucking headache.

How many fingers am I holding up?

How many fingers am I holding up? J asks, and holds up a middle finger.

\*

They are on their way to meet a black market contact and pick out a dog. N is excited. J is excited and also nervous.

Second thoughts?

No, I've just never purchased anything on the black market before.

It's easy. And you don't get in much trouble if you're caught.

How much trouble is not much trouble?

I don't know. I don't know anyone that's gotten caught.

That isn't comforting. We should wait. What if I did a terrible job on the papers?

You didn't. And we're already here.

Soon they are staring at rows of dogs in kennels and J doesn't care if they get caught because there is no way they are leaving without one. A few days later they will both wonder if getting a dog was really a good idea but for now they are both certain it is the best possible idea of all time.

They're fucking adorable, J says.

They're beyond fucking adorable, N says.

\*

The day is almost cold and sunless but not quite. There's a light rain. J hands N the bottle of whatever they're drinking. They're at the zoo. J stops at the bear enclosure and leans against the rail, staring into the dim, overgrown cage. The bars are rusty. Something is creaking in the wind, a cage door maybe.

There, in the corner, J says, and points to the pile of rotting fur and bones.

How long do you think it took to die?

J takes back the bottle, takes a sip.

Six days.

You're just making that up.

Yeah. Weren't there two? Do you think one ate the other?

Probably, N says and lights a cigarette. Where's the dog?

J points down the path towards the prairie dog pen. The dog is worrying at something in the ground. N calls the dog, but the dog never responds to being called. J whistles, and the dog looks at them like it's thinking about listening, then goes back to whatever dead thing it's found. They leave it and keep walking. There's water in a shallow pool in the tiger pit, with bottles and trash floating in it. Bones are scattered around the pit, but it's hard to know if they are tiger bones or the bones of whatever made the mistake of wandering into the pit.

I heard someone say there was a human skull in there.

I heard that too.

Suicide, probably.

It's growing dark, patrol lights cutting through the sky. N pulls J inside the shell of an old snack bar and they fuck against the freezers that smell like mold. The lights flash through holes in the roof and along the ground outside and over the scummy tiger pool and fade. The dog scratches at things in the corner until it gets bored, then jumps on them and licks their faces and they laugh and push it away. It's awkward the way sex is always awkward.

Once the patrol has passed they climb into the mountain lion pen and lie in the mouth of the fake rock cave and pretend the sparks in the distance are shooting stars. They share a cigarette, then a second. They don't talk. The rain is falling a little harder now, and the dog scrambles up and down the fake hillside and then stands over them, panting, and shakes water on them. Someone is fooling around on the old playground, blowing in tubing that makes animal sounds. For a moment, it sounds like there's still a living coyote roaming the artificial grasslands.

\*

N is standing in line. By the time N nears the front, N has forgotten the reason for being in this line. N looks around for something to spark a memory. The minor official at the window two people away looks like every other minor official in every other glass partitioned cubicle. The room the line snakes through looks like every other room. N thinks about asking another person in line what everyone is doing there, but questions often lead to a small room with two way mirrors. N knows this from experience.

What am I doing? N texts J.

It's too late to freak out, J responds, Everything will be fine.

I mean here. In this line.

Ending your lease?

Now N remembers. They are registering as a couple. N smiles, and is still smiling when the minor official says

Registration number?

\*

They are sitting with their backs to one of the few remaining curved glass walls of the empty aquarium. The dog is at the bottom of the tank, sniffing at whale bones.

When did you start breaking into places?

I don't know. I was young. There were still gangs. They kept trying to get me to join but I never liked being part of an organized group.

J laughs, takes a drink of whiskey, passes the bottle to N.

What about you?

I was the normal age. We were just looking for a place to drink and fuck. Some things never change.

Everything never changes.

They pass the flask a few more times. N gets up, walks through the shattered glass on the floor to a ladder leading down into the tank.

Coming?

J follows N into the bottom of the tank. The whale bones are large. Most of the vertebrae have been stolen. The skeletons are angular and awkward, nothing like the paintings and photos on the walls. N runs a hand along one of the long, smooth rib bones.

Remember when they were alive?

It would be hard to forget.

I never saw them.

Me neither.

The dog paws at one of the skulls. J crouches next to it and looks between the jaws. There aren't many teeth left. They wander through the bones and find a small vertebrate and one of the few remaining teeth to take with them.

Imagine this tank full of water, and hundreds of pounds of flesh on those bones.

They look at the broken glass, the skeletons at their feet.

\*

I want to get angry — really angry.

Why?

I don't know.

N kicks a stone at a cat in the shadows.

More whiskey?

Thanks.

They light cigarettes. N passes J the flask, J drinks, passes the flask back.

I want to do stupid, dangerous things with a lot of other people.

Why?

Exactly.

They walk down an alley they've never been down before. Electrical wires stretch between buildings. A sloth hangs in the middle. They watch it. The sloth doesn't move. They walk closer. There is a mirror lying in the alley. The sloth is watching itself in the mirror. It waves its curved claws at them and hisses when they block its view.

I fantasize about cutting out my registration, N says. All the time. Destroying my records.

And then what?

That's the problem.

N walks to the mirror, stamps on it until it's too broken to reflect anything.

That's probably more than seven years of bad luck.

\*

The official that is registering them as a couple doesn't want to.

Everyone is registering as a couple anymore, the official says. I hope you have a good reason.

N and J look at each other and try to think of an answer.

We love each other? J says.

The official snorts, and stamps their paperwork.

I used to be able to deny couple requests, but now it takes more paperwork to deny you than register you, the official says, and hands them a form. Sign here and here.

They sign the forms, and scan their registrations and then they're a couple.

Plan on requesting kids? the official asks.

God no, N says.

Good. You'd be petitioning me and I'd deny you.

You can't know that without hearing our case, J says.

Oh, the official says, I can.

The official hands them a folder of allowance regulations for couples and says their new allotment cards will arrive in two to six weeks. They use their new allowances to have dinner out, get days off from work and visit a resort. Then they've used up most of their new allowances and go back to work and finding abandoned buildings to have sex in. Still, being registered as a couple and getting extra allowances is nice, and makes it easier to bend the rules. They make a great team. They are very good at figuring out how to get fancier food and cheat on their forms. Then the excitement of small rebellions wears off, and N starts obsessing over registrations.

\*

The glass was broken long before they found the museum, and the climate control stopped even before that. Many of the artifacts are moldy or piles of dust or missing. The mounts in the mammal hall are still there, some missing fur or eyes. The dog runs from one mount to the next, growling at them or trying to pee on them. They break away the remaining glass on the black bear exhibit and crawl inside. The bear has both glass eyes but someone hacked off its paw and knocked it on its side. J and N set the black bear back up on its hind legs and lean it against the wall in the corner. N sits down, back resting against the bear, and J lies down, head on N's thigh. They don't say anything for a long time. The museum is silent, except for the dog's anxious whining. N runs a hand through J's hair and J starts to say something but stops. There aren't any windows in the room. Most of the light comes from the heavy metal flashlight that N brought. The dog knocked it over and now the beam of the light is shooting off at a crazy angle and illuminating a model beaver dam.

We should take a beaver home.

What would we do with a stuffed beaver?

I don't know. Put it on the table or something.

The dog would try to eat it.

Probably.

They are silent again for a while.

Maybe just a chipmunk.

It would take up less space on the table.

Exactly.

The dog would destroy it more quickly.

True.

They hear the patrol passing outside. The movement makes the bear sway unsteadily. The dog takes a break from nervous panting to sigh.

What about an otter? I like otters more than beavers.

In the end they take a squirrel, because it seems like it will be easier to explain where they got a taxidermied squirrel than a taxidermied otter. They keep it on the car dash, instead of the kitchen table, because J is worried about mites. No one ever asks where they got it.

\*

On the fourth night of that year's protest they build a blanket fort and reminisce about the real protests. The dog barks and paws at the blankets so they let it crawl inside. It lies between them. J pets its belly, N stroke its ears and it licks any part of them it can reach.

The slogans were better.

Because they weren't slogans.

They were. They just weren't written by PR officials.

There's no way you remember them. I don't.

I was a whole year older than you, and they were just that good.

This year's protest theme is "Rekindle the Spirit," reminiscent of last year's "Memories Ignited, Spirits Enflamed" which was more of a success than the previous "In the Spirit of the Rebels We Honor Our Democracy." For weeks now, government buildings have been displaying banners declaring "We Live In Harmony Because They Died In Strife." "Rekindle the Spirit!" placards are in every window. The food allotment office is decorated with imitation cardboard signs, silhouettes of protestors, wind-up molotov cocktails and riot gear.

Is it just me, J asks one evening, Or have people started wearing gas-masks earlier this year?

The week leading up to the protests, curfew was extended for anyone attending the live music or performances at Protest Park. TV and radio programming paused every few minutes for reminders about celebration allowance forms. N and J stayed out later than the extended curfew, never went to Protest Park, got their celebration allowance forms in on time but canceled their protest picnic. Now, they are lying in their blanket fort, eating their extra food items and trying to remember the real protests while the dog begs for treats.

Something I was excited about was canceled.

Your basic rights?

Well, those. But something else, a party maybe.

The protest moves through the street below them, the chanting growing and diminishing, sirens wailing. They're comfortable, lying inside and listening to the familiar sounds outside.

It's easy to get caught up in it, J says.

You've gone most years, haven't you? N says.

Well, yeah, J says. Everyone does.

You are no longer everyone, N says, and rolls on top of J.

They wrestle with each other and the dog until they knock down the blanket fort and fall asleep under the blankets.

\*

The fountain in the art museum atrium is dry and cracked and a colony of guinea pigs lives there. Feral cats live under a pile of paintings. N and J often spend evenings watching the dog hunt cats and the cats hunt guinea pigs. Mostly, the guinea pigs win. The galleries are empty, blank spots on the walls where paintings used to hang, only the ones piled in the atrium are left.

N likes to imagine that a group was making off with the paintings when one of them pointed out that no one was buying art anymore, not even on the black market, so they left them. J likes to imagine that people who loved art were trying to carry them away to a hidden space when a patrol passed and they scattered. They argue about their theories when there is a lull in the dog vs. cat vs. guinea pig war. When the lull lasts too long, they fuck in one of the galleries.

The art museum is one of their only haunts where they regularly see people. Couples, mostly, except for one time when they find a loner and have a threesome in what used to be the impressionist gallery. One night they go to the museum with a lot of people and they all have sex in the atrium. The patrols pass outside and the cats hiss at them and someone rolls on top of a guinea pig and squashes it. After that, N stops wanting to go to the art museum.

Was it the guinea pig?

No, there are too many people there now. It ruins the ambiance.

J tries to talk N into going back, but N won't. The art museum turns into an illegal club and N still won't go. And then one night the patrol realizes the place is full of people breaking curfew, and the next night the museum is a sanctioned club and the cats and guinea pigs are exterminated and a DJ's booth is installed and entrance costs two night's social allowances.

\*

They've been registered as a couple for a few months when a social worker visits.

Any plans for the day? The social worker asks. The social worker smiles too much and speaks too fast.

Not really, J says.

We thought we might visit the market, N says, which is news to J.

What a fantastic plan, the social worker says, It's a lovely day to get out and enjoy the community. And the market is such a vibrant, local place.

N looks out the window at the gray sky and drizzle.

It is nice weather, N says.

It really is, the social worker says, and J tries not to laugh.

I just wanted to drop in and see how things were, the social worker says, Because you haven't been to any of the events in the past few months and you've been picking up all your allotments in one quick visit.

The social worker opens a laptop, clicks around, then turns the screen towards N and J. The screen circulates through a series of tables, lists of registration numbers, time stamps and locations for the allotment centers, the market, park concerts, free museum days, local clubs and

bars and cafes. Their registration numbers are highlighted whenever they show up. Their registration numbers rarely show up.

So you see, the social worker says, We've been worried about you. I just wanted to make sure everything was all right.

Everything's fine, J says. We've just been enjoying each other's company. No dying shut-ins here.

J fakes a laugh. The social worker fake laughs too, but N refuses to smile. The social worker leaves.

Cigarette?

Thanks.

They lean out the window and smoke.

Fuck it, N says.

They start making brief appearances at community events once a week, and purposefully forget items on their shopping list so one of them can run into the center on the way home from work.

\*

They are hiding in alleys, drinking and avoiding patrols, and soon they'll go home for less than great sex and fall asleep and tomorrow will be the same. Patrol lights flash against buildings and are sucked up by clouds. The dog chases small animals, pees on trash, pushes itself between them and licks their hands.

I feel sad, N says.

It's the whiskey.

N takes another drink.

Maybe it's mostly the whiskey.

J drinks. Something that might be a bat flies overhead.

I wish there were still dinosaurs.

God, you're really drunk.

No, N says, then laughs and leans against J and says, Yes.

\*

Did you ever go to the mall?

Yes. No. I don't remember. Probably.

It was mostly something the older kids did.

Yeah, but there was first day of school shopping.

Was there?

I don't know.

J and N stroll through the weekend market. It's inside the old mall, now a designated historic site with statues of protestors on the stairs and a rotating photography display in what used to be the food court.

This was more fun when it was unregulated.

What happened to those vendors? Do you think they were listed?

Probably. Or they went underground.

Do people do that?

N shrugs, looks behind them.

There are rumors.

They browse through a selection of specialty items and home goods. It's the same stuff they could pick up at the allotment center, and it's common knowledge that the vendors are allotment employees out of uniform.

Now that I know the rumors, J says, I'm surprised you've stuck around.

So am I, some days.

J takes N's hand. They find something to buy so their presence is recorded. Then they leave.

\*

Cats slink in the shadows. It gives the space an extra dimension of some kind, like the cats inhabit a different world. The carpet is thick and ugly, but the light is too dim to make out colors so it's bearable. Old movie posters flake on the wall. Velvet ropes hang from posts at doorways or trail along the hall, stuffing pouring out of holes. The dog picks one up and carries it with them until it chases something into an alcove. N pushes open a heavy padded door. Rows of velvet seats run down the slanted floor to the screen. The curtains on one side of the screen droop from the ceiling. The glass from the projector's booth lies on the floor in pieces and crunches under their feet.

J and N walk through the rows of chairs, the room illuminated in pieces by N's flashlight. J sits in a chair, but gets up because it smells like dead things. The cats slink into the theatre behind them, down the aisle and between chairs. They wander to the front of the theater and climb onto the small rise under the screen. The screen is cut in places and covered in graffiti. N nudges the pile of curtain with a foot. Something moves. The dog growls around a furry thing in its mouth.

It's like the chairs are watching, N says.

They sit with their backs to the screen, staring at the empty audience. The dog lies near them and eats whatever furry thing it caught, crunching bones and licking up intestines. N turns off the flashlight.

Don't.

Shush.

They lean up against the torn screen, firmer than it looks, their movements making it shiver. Sometimes they grope the screen or the carpet instead of each other and laugh. Their faces hit each other hard once or twice. A cat slinks close enough to sniff at them but the dog growls and it slinks off again. They lie against each other and the screen in the dark for a long time.

I don't remember the screens being so big.

I remember them being bigger.

How many are in this theater?

I don't know. Three, maybe?

Maybe.

We should fuck in front of all of them.

We should try it in the chairs.

\*

J gets a call from a government number driving home from work.

You purchased two jars of creamy peanut butter last week?

Yes, J says, I'm allowed to, aren't I?

Yes, the official says, Although just to give you a heads up, the allotments are being re-evaluated and peanut butter might be reserved for couples with children.

But what about peanut butter frosting? Or peanut butter on apples or peanut butter cookies?

It's just under review, the official says, If you feel strongly about it, I'd encourage you to call your representative. Today I'm calling to tell you that peanut butter from the batch you purchased is being recalled for health and safety reasons. You'll receive a full refund.

Thank you, J says.

When N gets home, J is on the phone with their representative, listing foods that require peanut butter.

Peanut butter fudge, peanut butter cups, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, peanut butter and honey sandwiches, peanut sauce, peanut butter chocolate eggs.

Peanut butter in yogurt? N says, putting peanut butter in a bone for the dog.

Yes, J says, Peanut butter in yogurt, peanut butter in smoothies, peanut butter on celery, peanut butter straight from the jar.

J finishes filing an official complaint and hangs up. N is eating peanut butter out of one of the jars that was recalled for health and safety reasons. J explains this to N.

It tastes fine to me.

They don't get rid of the peanut butter, they don't get sick, and they use their refund for wine.

\*

It's cold by the time they make it to the airport but it's not curfew yet. The automatic sliding doors are stuck open so it's not difficult to get inside. Most of the interesting things are gone, or parts of them are gone — computer consoles, airline signs, chairs. Bits of the metal detectors and scanners lie on the floor. There are still baggage carts, and J jumps on one, gliding over the floor

until the cart hits a pile of trash and falls over. N helps J stand up, and they run up a stalled escalator. There are fewer piles of debris on the upper levels, so they find other baggage carts and race each other down the halls. When they grow bored with that, they lie on the carpeted floor in front of ceiling tall windows and watch it grow dark. They can hear the first of the patrols passing in the distance.

Are there still planes out there?

Probably. We'll come some other time and break into one.

You'd think they'd be locked away somewhere. Or taken for parts.

You'd think. But you'd probably be wrong.

Lights from the patrol grow closer. Something shatters, and noise echoes in a strange pattern.

The carpet is thin and might as well be concrete. J sits up and fishes a pack of cigarettes out of a pocket.

Light?

N passes J a lighter.

Move away from the window, maybe?

They find a darker corner, away from windows and smoke in silence. N lies down, head in J's lap.

You're blowing smoke in my face.

Like you care.

J smiles in the dark, plays with N's hair and watches patrol lights cross over the windows and fade. They finish their cigarettes. After a while, they get up and wander more. One of the boarding gates is open and the ramp is still extended. They walk down the walkway, the ramp

shifting under them in a satisfying way, night air blowing towards them. They stand at the edge, looking out over the airfield.

There is still a plane.

Should we go?

Not tonight.

They sit on the end of the ramp, legs swinging in the air, watch the lights in the city and drink.

They sit on the boarding ramp for a long time.

I wish there were still flights, other places to go.

They say there are. Somewhere. Other cities.

They say that to keep us here. If we thought there weren't any we would try to find them.

What about the people who show up at the meetings?

They're always so vague about where they come from.

N takes a long drink from the flask.

Want to know what I really think?

Obviously.

I think they're government plants. I think they're there just to keep us hoping and planning but not acting.

That's a bleak view of things.

That's the best kind.

Not for everything.

For most things.

N lights another cigarette. They sit on the edge of the ramp until most of the lights in the city go out.

\*

It's that sort of gray, heavy, unreal feeling. I'm not really hung over, but I'm not really not hung over.

Mhm.

It could be rain, or because I stayed up too late. It's not necessarily from drinking.

Mhm.

J finishes getting dressed and sits down on the edge of the bed again.

Heavy. Heavy and gray. Do you know what I mean?

Mhm.

J lies down on the bed, face in the pillows. N rolls over to look at J. Even though there is less than a pillow length between them it feels farther, like even if N wanted to touch J it would be impossible.

Don't you have to be at work soon? J says.

I'm taking today off.

The alarm goes off on the other side of the room. The dog whines. Neither of them gets up to turn off the alarm or feed the dog.

Promise you got it approved.

Promise.

I'll see you tonight.

J walks across the room and turns off the alarm.

Have fun doing nothing.

Oh, I'll do things. And it will be fun.

J gives N the finger, grabs the car keys and leaves. N lies in bed for a few minutes, then gets up but doesn't bother with clothes, walks into the bathroom and takes out rubbing alcohol, a razor blade, tweezers and sits on the tile floor. Sitting naked on the tile floor is cold, but making the first cut warms N up and soon the cold tiles feel good. N laughs at how easy cutting out the registration chip is. N sits and stares at the bloody piece of plastic, the blood on the tiles, the self-inflicted wound and waits for the moment to feel dangerous or at least subversive. The longer N sits naked and bloody on the bathroom floor staring at a strip of plastic the more it starts to seem silly, so N cleans things up and goes back to bed. For the next few days, N carries the registration chip around in a pocket, waiting to feel like a rebel or something, but instead grows feverish and worried because the cut is starting to swell and ooze.

\*

You didn't think this part through, did you? J shouts. I can't take you to the hospital. I can't even take you to a clinic because you're a fucking idiot.

I don't need to go anywhere.

Part of J knows that shouting at N when N is feverish and slightly delirious, when N's arm might be turning septic, isn't nice or a solution to any problem, but mostly J is pissed off.

Yes you do. Yes you fucking do.

Please just be nice, N says and looks so pitiful that J feels bad, and sits on the edge of the bed and rubs N's back.

I'll figure something out, J says, There are probably doctors selling services on the black market or something. God, you're burning up.

I'm cold.

I'll leave work early, J promises, but isn't sure how to keep that promise.

When J's at work, N admits that going to the hospital would be a good idea and stumbles into the bathroom and pulls out the razor blade and rubbing alcohol and tweezers. N is feeling light headed and just looking at the infected incision makes N feel nauseous. But N makes the cut anyway, and tries to put the chip back in, but feels faint and has to lie down.

\*

N is lying in the hospital bed in a drugged sleep. J sits on a vinyl armchair next to the bed. The armchair is oddly proportioned, like it was made for something besides sitting. J is tired of watching N's drugged, sleeping face and looks out the window instead. The window faces a boring wall. A nurse comes in and looks at charts and machines and fiddles with the IV in N's arm. The nurse doesn't look at J. No one in the hospital looks at J. They barely look at N. N's arm with the IV needle is shackled to the side of the bed.

It's just for show, J says to the sleeping N. At least, that's what you'd tell me. If you were awake.

N isn't awake and doesn't move. J feels less confident. A group of officials with clipboards and illegible name tags and somber expressions crowd into the room with a doctor. J can't tell if it's any of the doctors that have been there before.

You have to leave now, one of the officials says while the doctor adds something to N's IV.

J? N says, still groggy.

N! J says, but is escorted out of the room by two officials and isn't sure N could hear.

\*

J is nervous, surrounded by the shining hospital atrium. The dirt and grime of the city are shut out by the automatic, sealing doors. Even the air feels different, like it moves. It's cooler in the hospital than any building J's been in. There's a low humming that makes everything else muted, except shoes clicking on the shiny floors. The hospital is nothing like the registration office or allotment office or the clinic or any of the other government offices. J feels isolated. The line to the front desk moves slowly. When J reaches the desk, the nurse says

Visiting?

Yes, J says.

The nurse slides a thick stack of forms across the desk.

Fill these out, then get in line for a badge.

Which line is that? J asks, but the nurse is already looking at the next person in line and saying

Visiting? Fill these out, then get in line for a badge.

J fills out the forms while standing in line for a badge. Filling out the forms is comforting. It's the same information as all the other forms J has filled out, the paper is the same and the pen is just as shitty as a pen in a government office. J could be standing in line for a new allotment card, or to change registration information, or to move, or to pay a fine for not taking out the trash. J's so busy thinking of all the different lines and forms and wondering how tall a stack of all the forms from a single person's life would be that the guard has to say Visiting? twice to get

J's attention. J hands over the forms and the guard stamps them in a few places and types J's registration number into the computer and passes over a badge.

If you don't know the room number, ask at information.

The line at information is almost as long as the first two lines. There are more forms to fill out at the information desk, but then J has N's room number and heads into the labyrinth of halls and numbered signs with arrows that contradict each other. It's hard to know if the elevators actually stop at a new floor each time or not, because all the hallways look the same and all the doctors and nurses have the same blank expression and all the patients and visitors have the same worried expression but the numbers and contradicting arrows change and eventually J finds N's room.

\*

The whole time N is in the hospital no one mentions it. The apartment feels lonely, their bed huge. The dog is needy. Food from only one allotment card looks meager. The refrigerator light illuminates empty shelves. J avoids the places they normally go together, especially the places where other people go too. At work, people give J odd looks but never say anything. J knows everyone thinks N's been listed. J isn't sure that N hasn't been.

I want to go home.

The dog misses you.

Do you remember to feed it?

It sits in your chair at the table and sleeps on your side of the bed.

N smiles, but doesn't laugh. They look out the window and don't talk. The television in the corner of the room is on mute, playing a talk show where someone demonstrates the acrobatic

tricks their guinea pigs know. Every few moments official bulletins flash on the screen: changes to government office hours, reminders of early curfews, updates on the feral cat population, suggestions for recipes to make food allotments last longer. J leaves the hospital. The sidewalk is grimy and cats slink in the shadows. Out of habit, J lurks in back streets until after curfew, but it's boring without N, so J goes home, eats cereal, watches porn and goes to bed. The dog tries to sleep on N's side of the bed but J shoves it to the floor.

\*

N's release papers say a lot of things about mental imbalances and anxiety and possible paranoia, and a case worker checks in a few times over the next month. The case worker declares N an upright, healthy citizen. J laughs about that for days. N is miffed that the social worker didn't sense any mental imbalance or paranoia.

I don't have any anxiety, N says, cooking dinner. But I am paranoid. Only an idiot would miss that.

Only an idiot would call you an upright citizen. The same way only an idiot would register as your partner.

Do you think I'm an upright citizen?

J laughs and pours N another drink.

\*

The library lobby has shattered skylights, broken tile floors, a cracked mural on the wall. There are children riding animals, climbing into and out of books, a rabbit in a suit jacket, a bear in a red shirt. Even faded the painting is garish. J stares at the mural feeling a moment of vertigo.

I was here before.

Really?

I wouldn't make up that mural. How could I?

Maybe there's a picture of it somewhere.

But I remember it this size. And these tiles, and light coming in from the skylights.

Maybe you were very little.

Patrol lights flash through the skylights, picking out bits of color and animal. The children's laughing faces look evil in the flashing lights. The patrol passes, and the lobby is dimmer until their eyes adjust again. Ivy has grown under the door and is spreading out across the floor.

Those vines will reach the walls one day, grow up over all those creepy kids and animals and out the skylights, N says into J's neck.

Mhm.

They walk further into the building, past the sprawling front desk that the dog pees on, to the shelves. Some books are still on the shelves but many lie on the floor, spines cracked, pages bent. They leaf through books, but it's too dark to read and they've forgotten a light. They find picture books, and tear out the pages that they like. They make out in a row in the nonfiction section. N backs into a shelf and knocks off a set of encyclopedias. They stand still, bodies touching, while the books fall.

\*

When J comes home from work N is cooking dinner, slamming cabinet doors, pounding back beers and swearing at the dog. Not wanting to make N angrier, J calls the dog into the bedroom and shuts the door. After a while, N knocks.

Hungry?

Maybe?

J opens the door.

It's not you.

I figured.

It's never you. Sometimes it's you. But not this time.

They sit down at the table.

I'm just angry but there's not really a reason. You know?

No. Yes. I don't know.

Well, fuck it, N says and leaves the house.

J pets the dog, finishes eating. Later, when N still isn't back, J pulls on a coat, grabs N's coat, the flask and a pack of cigarettes, calls the dog and leaves. N is sitting on a billboard, not far from their apartment. J climbs up the slick, too small spikes to the catwalk and sits next to N.

The dog whimpers below them, then barks, then gives up and finds a small animal to kill. J lights a cigarette and passes it to N, then passes N the flask and lights a second cigarette. They're silent.

It's windy, on the verge of rain. J puts N's coat around N's shoulders and tries to sit farther away from the edge.

Thanks, N says.

Sure.

They smoke.

Sorry I get so angry.

J shrugs.

Most people save their anger for the protests, go a little crazy, and start fresh. You don't go to the protests and never start fresh.

You left out the going crazy part.

Yeah, well, you're always a little crazy.

The rain puts out N's cigarette.

We should climb down. Before it gets impossible.

They spend the rest of the night curled into each other in bed, the dog at their feet, the lights off, pretending they don't exist.

\*

They line their closet with the pictures from the children's books they found in the library, and pile blankets on the floor. On nights when they're kept awake by patrols or nightmares or knowing tomorrow will be the same, they curl up in the closet.

We should have brought books back.

The pictures could be dangerous enough.

The closet is just small enough that it is hard for them to lie comfortably together. J's leg falls asleep under N, and N's arm pushes the door open, and the dog lies outside the closet and whines at them. But it's still their favorite place in the apartment.

We found the pictures in a dumpster, if anyone asks.

Or lying on the street.

Near the library, if they seem skeptical.

Precisely.

No one ever asks about the pictures.

\*

N finds it hard to keep silent, but doesn't want J to know in case things don't work out. N has already been flagged, and if anyone notices this there's a very good chance that N will be listed. That's part of what makes it exciting. N hasn't felt this good in a long time. N has trouble concentrating at work. N wants to have sex all the time. J becomes concerned.

Do you know the last time we had sex at home? J says, lying half off the bed, tangled in sheets.

Last night?

I mean, J says, trying to untangle the sheets and stand up, Do you know the last time we regularly had sex at home? Good sex, not just the half-hearted kind.

Last night.

Fuck it N, J says, and gives up untangling the sheets. You know what I mean.

What do you mean?

N lights a cigarette.

The last time was before you cut out your registration.

N laughs.

Relax, J. Enjoy it.

I'm worried.

It will be fine. Really.

\*

It isn't fine. Someone does notice, and officials show up at N's job and ask to see N in private. N feeds them lies but they don't buy it. N is listed. When J finds out N thinks it's all over. J's never

been so angry before. But eventually J calms down, and N apologizes, and J tries to understand, then files a petition to be moved to the country with N.

\*

Well, this isn't so bad.

N glares at J and touches the mildew on the walls. The dog walks stiff legged, fur raised along its back.

It smells like death.

Don't be pessimistic.

Their relocation officer walks into the house behind them, wearing the self-satisfied smile that everyone working in relocation wears.

It's charming, really. And so much more room than in the city. In a way I envy your kind. The relocation officer laughs and steps over a hole in the floorboards like it isn't real.

Let's see what you'll need for the kitchen.

They walk into the kitchen. The dog barks at something in one of the cupboards. The officer opens the cupboard and a guinea pig crawls out, blinking at them like it's never seen humans before. J opens the other cupboards, but they're all guinea pig free. The relocation officer checks the taps and opens the fridge, which smells like mold. There's something furry in the back corner of the lowest shelf that was once probably a vegetable.

We'll set you up with some bleach, the officer says generously.

They walk through the dining area and bedroom and a small room with no discernible purpose.

Then they stand around the kitchen counter and sign and initial forms. Then they sign and initial

some forms to say that they signed and initialed the first set of forms. Then they go back out to the driveway and the relocation officer attaches a mileage reader and GPS unit to the car.

You're all set! Your furniture and belongings should be here within the week.

Week? J says.

The relocation officer nods.

Shouldn't take much longer than that to scan it all. In the meantime, if you really need something, just drop by and we'll fill out the right forms.

The officer gives them a tolerant smile and tosses their pile of initialed forms on the floor of the relocation department vehicle and drives away.

Don't even pretend it's going to be okay, N says to J.

Probably, J says, it will not be okay.

That night, they sleep in the car. They spend most of the day watching the dog growl at the guinea pig. N's case manager shows up with more forms to sign and initial and some cleaning supplies.

You'll have this place feeling like home in no time! Did they get your water and electric turned on?

N and J nod. They accept the cleaning supplies.

Fantastic! the case manager says. One of my last clients went without anything for a month and kept calling in tears. You will call, of course, N, if you need anything?

Of course! N says.

Fantastic! the case manager says. And you won't forget, of course, N, to arrive promptly for your next Relocation Assimilation Seminar?

Of course not! N says.

Fantastic! the case manager says, then gets into a relocation department vehicle and drives away.

I'm not your client! N shouts after the car, but not until it's far away.

Their personal belongings trickle in slowly over the next week, computer hard drives wiped, files of paperwork in the wrong order, a box of kitchen items they don't recognize. They get a long list of things that didn't pass. The relocation officer brings it on the last Relocation Assessment Visit, so they assume the department grew tired of scanning their things and stopped. It's the only negative thing they list on their Relocation Final Assessment form. Everything else they say was handled 'Excellently' or 'Very Well' because this seems like the best way to get the department to leave them alone.

J takes a couple of days off, and they scrub the entire house, stopping every twenty minutes to chase the guinea pig back into the yard. Then J has to go back to work, and N spends the days hacking the tracking devices attached to their computers, watching porn and drinking their month's allotment of beer. But then the dog gets sick and then the dog dies and they have to figure out how to get rid of the body.

## And Then

It's midnight. They pass the mansion with the giraffe in the front yard but the giraffe isn't out. They pass the park where they threw the dog in the river. They keep driving. The baby is asleep. They stop. The stars are very bright. N crouches in the gravel of the road's edge and makes coffee. They sit on the trunk of the car and smoke.

\*

They spend the next night at a resort with armadillos on the lawn and a platypus in the fountain. J is smoking and watching N try to play with the baby. The baby is more interested in the platypus or eating dirt.

J? A voice says, and recites J's registration number.

Yes, J says, and the minor official behind J says it would be best for everyone if J comes along for a quiet chat and J agrees that yes, that would be best for everyone and follows the official inside. The baby stops eating dirt and crawls away, so N doesn't see the official, or J leaving.

Will you take the baby now? N turns around to ask J but J is gone.

J's still burning cigarette is lying on the ground. The platypus flops around in the water, splashing the marble walls. The baby laughs.

Where's J? N says.

The baby crawls towards the topiary maze. N picks up the baby and heads for their room, trying to walk quickly but not suspiciously. The halls are empty, which might be because lunch is being served in the dining room. The baby squirms and tries to throw itself out of N's arms. In their room, everything looks the same but N thinks it's all been moved slightly to one side. N grabs a few essentials, the car keys, J's wallet and leaves. The halls are still empty because everyone is still eating lunch. N is starting to feel panicked. Footsteps approach around the corner.

Thank god, J says. I was afraid you'd left without me.

N tries not to laugh too loudly. J takes the baby, grabs N's hand like they are on a classy resort vacation, with registrations in place and legal. They chat about vacation things all the way to the car, making shit up.

They've been driving for half an hour when J says

I need to get out.

N pulls off the road.

What happened?

J gets out of the car and lights a cigarette. N does too. J smokes the cigarette, lights a second, smokes.

Fuck.

N waits. J finishes the second cigarette, reaches for a third, stops.

They found the fucking dog. Then they found us. How the fuck did they find us?

I don't know.

I didn't think they'd try to find us in two days.

How'd they find the dog?

We're supposed to pick it up.

The fuck?

I said we dropped it off at a burial service and they said it seems like it wasn't operating to code but since the paperwork hasn't come through we're still responsible for proper disposal.

We aren't going to pick it up, are we?

I don't know.

The baby cries.

If we don't pick it up, doesn't that seem obvious?

But what if we do pick it up, and we've been flagged?

But if we don't, we'll be flagged for sure.

The baby cries more loudly. They share another cigarette.

\*

The dog is in a heavy, vacuum sealed bag on a rolling cart in a walk-in freezer. The official rolls out the cart, talks in a hushed tone like an undertaker.

They found it wrapped in plastic and duct tape, tied to cinder blocks and...

Please, N says, Don't. I just can't...I mean, it's just...

I understand, the official says, It's a shock, I'm sure.

We trusted them. A shady spot under a tree, they told us. Lots of grass, a ball engraved on the headstone. And instead.

N waves a hand at the bundle on the cart. The room is chilly and sterile, but the frost on the outside of the bag is already turning to water.

I just need you to sign these.

N signs some forms.

We'll post an alert about them, the official says, stamping the forms with a heavy rubber stamp. The stamp obscures the non-existent burial service name that N wrote. The official rolls the cart out the door and helps N put the dog's frozen body into the car trunk.

I'm sure you'll find the perfect resting place, the official says, and shakes N's hand.

N hopes the official is right.

\*

Any ideas for getting rid of it this time?

No.

Where should we go?

I don't know.

Should we head back into the country?

I don't know. Can't I just drive?

Yeah, let's just drive.

They stop for lunch at Protest Park and eat sandwiches among the bronze statues of protesters being tear gassed and restrained by police. The baby crawls in the grass, spits out cereal, licks statues and talks to its hands.

What if we throw it over a cliff?

J retrieves the baby from between a statue's legs.

The baby? Even I think that's harsh.

The dog.

The baby crawls back to the statue. N lights a cigarette.

Where's the closest cliff?

They share the cigarette.

It should be a tall cliff.

In a remote area.

With a terrible gorge at the bottom.

I can't think of any.

I can't either.

But it was a good idea.

J packs up the lunch things and N picks up the baby. J drives. They can smell the dead dog in the trunk. The smell grows worse the longer they drive. When they can't stand the smell anymore they stop by the side of the road and pitch the dog into a sort of gorge. It gets stuck on the bushes, so they toss rocks at it until it crashes through the branches.

Stay! N says.

Good dog, J says, and they laugh, and walk back to the car holding hands.

\*

N is driving.

It was a good dog.

It was especially good at fetch.

Caught the ball every time.

Always brought back the right stick.

We trained it pretty well.

It always came when we called it.

Yeah, and it knew so many tricks.

It's getting dark. They can still see the lights from the city in the rearview mirror. The city is fading behind them, but not as quickly as they'd like. Sometimes, they hear the patrols passing overhead.

Think the baby knows any tricks?

The baby doesn't even know to come when it's called.

The dog never came when we called it.

It was terrible at fetch.

So terrible.

\*

They are trying to sleep in the car, but the baby keeps waking up and crying. The car still smells like dead dog. N's legs are propped on the dashboard and J's legs are across N's lap and every time the baby cries and they have to untangle themselves one of them hits the other in the face or the chest. It's still barely dawn.

Fuck this.

They untangle themselves again and J's knee hits N in the face. They crawl out of the car, swearing, and find places to pee. N makes coffee and smokes and J feeds the baby. Then J smokes and they drink coffee. They look at the baby and the sky starting to turn light.

We should go.

Where?

J shrugs. They pack things up and strap the baby into the car seat. N gets into the driver's seat, starts the car.

How's your arm?

Fine. How's yours?

Fine.

The baby cries.

\*

They stop at an amusement park. They sit in the weeds under a rusting roller coaster. The baby is shouting, climbing on old cars from the ride. J and N are trying to remember roller coasters.

You put your hands in the air, and it felt sort of stupid but also fun.

There was something they used to say over the loudspeakers.

Make sure your seat is in the full, upright and locked position?

Those were airplanes.

J fishes something unidentifiable out of the baby's mouth.

Don't be too long.

I'll be quick.

Don't forget cigarettes!

Please wait until the ride has come to a complete stop!

Yeah, J says, but just to the baby who isn't paying attention, That was it.

The baby finds a teacup pig and a stick.

\*

N does try to be quick but it's difficult to navigate the black market in the middle of the day without an internet connection. No one will let N borrow their phone. Everyone acts like they know nothing about the black market, even though everyone knew where to get a dog when that was what N wanted. N finds K eating lunch.

K, N says.

N, K says. You look like shit.

Thanks.

They came by asking for you.

Who? Where?

Work. Some sort of minor official. They didn't know you'd been listed. They know about the dog.

What about the dog?

K looks at N like maybe N hasn't been paying attention, covers a piece of fish in tarter sauce.

That you have one? A dog?

Oh. N smiles. Right. What dog?

K laughs.

What are you doing here?

I need some stuff. My phone was shut off.

Fuck, K says. Why?

No clue. I figure my computer is bugged.

K nods.

I guess they are serious about the dog.

What dog?

K laughs again and pulls out a phone.

It's not registered so don't fuck it up. And bring it back before my break is over.

Thanks. Need anything?

You know what I need.

Need anything I'm willing to get you?

Just the normal I guess, K says.

The rest doesn't take long — some back doors, basement rooms, minor official's offices. N returns K's phone and a bag of dog treats, brushes off K's request for sexual favors, and waits for the last contact at the edge of the city. N smokes, ashes into the trunk. The contact shows up with baby diapers and clothes, a pacifier, jars of baby food.

You're the second one today, the contact says.

Second what?

Second person buying baby stuff.

Guess they'd better change the amounts they give.

Guess so. You partnered?

Yeah.

Kid legal?

Not black market.

If you need registrations I know who to talk to.

I'm who to talk to, N says, And I don't need registrations.

Right, the contact says. The last couple asked if I knew about the compound.

What compound?

That's what I said.

The contact gets in a car and leaves.

\*

The baby is still chasing the teacup pig through a pile of twisted metal and broken pieces of a carousel. Giraffes and rabbits the size of very small horses lie in a pile, most of their paint gone and metal stirrups rusting. The pig is backed into a corner and squealing like it's being tortured. The baby laughs and tries to throw itself on top of the pig. J sits down on a fading plaster animal that might have been an anteater and watches the baby. The pig squeals and squeezes itself through a hole into the center of the pile of scraps. The baby hits things with its stick until it hits itself on the head and cries. J picks up the baby. The baby contorts its body into inhuman shapes so J walks away to a grassy area and puts it down. It crawls to the closest pieces of metal, picks up flakes of rust and puts them in its mouth.

I swear, J says, It's like you have a death wish.

The baby makes baby noises, smiles, drools rust.

I guess you're pretty cute, J says and tries to pry the metal flakes out of the baby's hands.

Cig? N asks, messing J's hair.

J jumps, startled, and the baby gets wide eyed like it's going to cry but N picks it up and blows on its stomach and it laughs instead.

You're in a good mood.

I got everything on the list.

Well done.

The cats ate H's ears and both thumbs.

H? J says and then remembers. Wait. Both thumbs?

Yeah, N says, Both thumbs.

What does that mean?

Fuck if I know.

\*

It's night. J is holding the baby and making sappy noises at it. N wants to find it ridiculous but instead feels ridiculously affectionate.

They sell kids on the black market.

We're not selling it.

I didn't say that we should. But what are we doing with it?

I don't know. What should we do with you? J says in a high pitched voice to the baby.

The baby coos and grabs at J's face.

How much do they sell them for?

A baby would go for about the same as a litter of puppies.

Fuck. Who buys them?

People like us, mostly. Well, people like us who want to have kids.

They sit in silence and watch a moth kill itself in the lantern. In the distance, some sort of elephant or bison trumpets. The baby makes adorable baby sounds.

We aren't going to sell it, are we?

Doesn't seem that way.

\*

They drive. They pass the house they were assigned by the relocation department. They pass the park where they threw the dog in the river. They pass the resort where the minor official found them. They drive until they are somewhere they have never seen before and stop driving.

Remember being little and seeing places for the first time and how exciting that was?

No.

Me neither.

Sometimes I like to imagine that I am seeing a place for the first time.

I think this is the first time I've seen a place for the first time.

What about our house in the country?

It was a lot like places in the city.

They keep driving, but slowly. Then the new surroundings are old and they drive more quickly.

\*

Remember when we used to go out clubbing all night?

J stirs the fire with a stick so sparks fly into the dark.

No. Did we ever do that?

Well, maybe not us. But as a collective whole, people, humanity.

But did we? Did we really? Or did we just collectively imagine that we did?

I don't know how to answer that. Pass me the soup.

\*

The baby is sleeping in the shelter they made. It cries every few hours and they try to figure out what it wants. Its diaper is clean, it won't eat, it tries to throw itself into the fire when N sings to it. The baby pulls out some of J's hair, tries to eat it, hiccups a few times and goes back to sleep.

I need a smoke.

A car passes on the gravel road. It stops by where they left their car.

Should we put out the fire?

That seems suspicious.

Lights flash through the trees.

Hello? a voice calls.

N and J look at each other. Footsteps tramp through the bushes toward them and a spotlight shines in their faces.

Evening folks, says a voice with the too friendly inflection of a minor official. I'm looking for...

The light is too blinding to see the minor official but they can hear papers shuffle on a clipboard.

The minor official reads off N's number.

That belong to one of you?

N raises a hand to block out the light.

It's me.

Could you come with me? the minor official asks and points the light away from their faces.

The baby wakes up and cries. N gets up to follow the minor official. J gets up to comfort the baby and give the minor official a dirty look. N follows the minor official to the minor official's car which is idling on the side of the road.

Just over here, the minor official says and opens the trunk.

N leans over the minor official's shoulder to look into the trunk, then catches a scent of what's inside.

Oh god, N says, Oh fuck, what the hell?

I know, the official says, It's a lot to take in. And I'm sure you thought everything was taken care of.

Right, N says, trying not to gag at the plastic body bag that holds the dog.

I just need you to sign these, the official says.

N signs some forms on the clipboard and the minor official finds another piece of heavy plastic to wrap around the body bag holding the dog and they put it on the floor of the car.

Sorry about waking the kid, the official says, and pats N's shoulder and drives away.

N looks at the dead dog wrapped in plastic on the floor of the car, closes the door and walks back through the woods to J and the baby.

\*

The dog smells even worse than before.

This can't stay in the car.

The body bag squelches when they move it. They drop it on the ground and drive to the other side of the road but they can still smell the dog. They smoke to mask the smell.

We can't leave it here.

What if we bury it?

It's too obvious. They would guess we were the ones that buried it.

What if we burn it?

We don't have papers.

Papers aren't that hard to forge. And they seem to be working.

What I meant was that we don't have a permit for a bonfire. It takes a long time to burn a body.

How long?

I don't know.

The baby cries and J opens a jar of baby food. The baby spits out every other spoonful of food and laughs. N and J don't eat. No cars drive by.

What do you need to forge cremation paperwork?

Nothing besides the internet and a printer.

So, the city.

Yes.

They find a clearing in the woods. They pile branches and small logs on top of the dead dog. It's nearly dark by the time they have enough. They pour stove fuel over the pile and J lights it and jumps away. The pile burns. At first it's just wood smoke but then they smell burning plastic.

The body bag.

They add more wood to the fire. It smells like burning hair.

The dog's fur.

The baby cries because they won't let it near the flames, then cries because the smoke gets in its eyes, then cries because it's hungry, then because it doesn't like what they feed it. The clearing smells like burning flesh.

I was afraid the smell would make me hungry, N says, But it doesn't.

It's dark. Their faces are gray with soot. They are running out of wood to add to the fire. The baby cries itself to sleep. J and N sit next to it and watch the fire burn down. At some point they fall asleep. In the morning, they gather up the all pieces of the dog they can find and put it into a garbage bag. Then they load up the car and drive back to the city, and while J finds an internet connection and print shop for the forged cremation certificate, N finds a dumpster for the burnt dog remains.

\*

J is driving. N is trying to fall asleep but J keeps talking.

Those days when it was so hot you were sweating by the time you reached the bus stop.

Really?

Yeah. I liked them.

No, I mean, really? Were they real?

I remember them.

Do you? Do you remember them?

Can't you let me pretend that I remember them?

Fine. I remember swimming lessons. At the pool. The one on 5th.

No!

What? You remember sweating at bus stops, I remember swimming lessons.

It's very dark and the air is cool. N rolls down the window and sticks a foot out into the night air, ankle resting on the window edge. Sparks on the distant outskirts of the city. In the backseat, the baby whimpers.

Do we have a plan?

No.

Do we need a plan?

I don't know.

Remember when our only plans were getting a place together, and a dog, and finding abandoned buildings to fuck in?

Those were all good plans.

\*

They pass piles of rubble that might have been a neighborhood. The headlights catch a flash of some animal's flank but it moves back into the shadows too quickly to see. The patrol passes overhead.

How long are we driving tonight?

I don't know. I'll fall asleep soon.

Smoke?

Yeah.

They light cigarettes and look out at the road. No one else is on the road and J drives down the center, wheels on both sides of the double yellow line. The baby whimpers again, and then cries.

Pull over.

Why bother?

J parks the car in the middle of the road. They sit on the trunk, feed the baby and stare at the city in the distance.

\*

Picnics. Blankets on the ground, but you could feel the rocks and roots underneath. And ants. There were always ants at picnics.

Like sand in sandwiches at the beach. You couldn't have one without the other.

You weren't supposed to go into the water after eating for, like, three hours.

I think it was only one.

Were you ever at the beach?

No. What did you rub on yourself? To keep out the sun?

I don't remember.

Did you ever have a red and white checkered blanket for a picnic?

I never had a real picnic.

Yeah. There were never ants.

\*

There is a building in the distance but they can barely see it. It's pretty far off the road, and they don't want to leave the car because there have been a lot of patrols that morning. They sit next to the car, watch for patrols and teach the baby to play fetch. N tries to pry the license plate off the car but only manages to cut a finger.

Do you think that we need to do that?

They do it in the movies.

What movies?

The kind with cars.

They can recognize the car without it, anyway.

Because it's so ugly?

Because it's the only one out here. Also because it's so ugly.

N sucks on the cut finger and looks at the building they've been ignoring. J watches N looking at the building.

Should we walk there?

What about patrols?

Fuck patrols.

What if there are people there?

Exactly.

They keep driving.

\*

They're at the playground of an elementary school. The slide and monkey bars still work but the swing set is an empty frame. The baby sits in the dirt at the bottom of the slide and babbles to a pebble. Every few minutes the baby stops babbling to the pebble and tries to eat it and N fishes it out of the baby's mouth. The baby cries until N hands back the pebble. J is pouring gas into the car's tank.

Don't spill any, N says from the slide.

Fuck you.

Look, if I was helping, this baby would have eaten a rock at least three times already. It would probably be a dead baby, and getting rid of an unregistered dead baby has to be at least twice as difficult as an illegal dead dog.

Shit, J says.

Did you spill?

No. Look.

N looks. A government vehicle is driving towards them. N fishes the pebble out of the baby's mouth.

Howdy folks, the minor official calls out, walking towards them across the playground.

Why do only minor officials say howdy folks? N says. I've never heard anyone else say that.

It's probably in their training manual.

J caps the gasoline container.

They learn it in the same course that teaches them the minor official smile.

The minor official is too close to talk about now, smiling, name badge illegible, clipboard in hand.

Lovely day for a family outing. Hate to ruin things with bad news, but, well, that's my job.

The minor official laughs. J and N don't.

I'm looking for J, the minor official says and reads J's registration number.

That's me, J says.

Sad news I'm afraid, the minor official says, We've found your dog's remains. I'm very sorry to be the one to tell you. Did you know it had passed?

J and N look at each other.

Yes, J says, We did. We brought it to a crematorium.

I see, the minor official says. Well, than I'm even more sorry to inform you that the crematorium was not operating to code.

I don't know what to say, N says.

You'll have to come with me, the minor official says.

They load the baby into the car. The baby is crying because they took away the pebble.

I told you I never wanted kids, N says, and follows the government vehicle back towards the city.

\*

I'm impressed by your department's attention to detail, J says, signing the last of the forms.

We try, The official says and slides a cardboard box across the desk.

They shake hands.

In the car, the baby is crying. J hands N the box. N opens it, lifts out a smooth length of bone.

It doesn't look like our dog. It doesn't look like any dog.

Our dog's DNA matches an illegal litter and its paperwork was never processed, J says.

How unexpected, N says, lifting the dog's skull out of the box.

They drive past their old apartment. Someone else lives there now. The light is on in J's old office, someone J doesn't recognize is sitting at the desk.

Does anyone even know we're gone?

I missed my last Relocation Assimilation Seminar, N says.

They leave the city.

\*

I liked when the dog woke us up in the morning by jumping on the bed.

You hated that.

Did I?

They are sitting on the trunk of the car watching the baby pull up fistfuls of grass. The box with the burnt dog bones sits between them. Something brown with long legs or a tail is climbing in a nearby tree.

I liked when it shoved its head under my arm so I'd pet it.

You hated that.

Did it have a black muzzle and brown ears? Or brown ears and a black muzzle?

It had a white streak on its front leg.

That was on its tail.

Maybe it was both.

Remember the time it got into a fight with a cat?

Wasn't that a porcupine?

Remember when it stole the sausage at the market?

Did we ever take it to the market?

Remember when we took it to Protest Park and it growled at the statues?

I think that was someone else's dog.

\*

They find a large, flat stone in a field and lay the dog bones on top.

I'm going to find another rock to smash them.

N walks away. The baby crawls onto the stone and puts one of the bones in its mouth.

Don't, J says.

The baby ignores J, picks up another bone, waves it in the air, laughs. J sits on the ground and watches N search for another rock. The baby is happy playing with the dog bones. J smokes a cigarette sitting in the sun, enjoying the breeze, eyes closed.

Wake up J.

J looks up at N. N is holding a mini-kangaroo.

I thought you were looking for a stone to smash the dog bones.

I was, N says, But I found a mini-kangaroo.

The mini-kangaroo has big eyes and big hind feet that twitch but it is content to be carried around. The baby gets excited, makes squealing noises, waves its hands and falls over. It lies next to the dog bones then crawls towards J and N and the mini-kangaroo. The mini-kangaroo blinks at the baby, twitches, then closes its eyes and hangs its head over N's shoulder.

We still need another stone.

Yes. But I like how this mini-kangaroo reminds me of the dog.

J pets the mini-kangaroo's head and looks into its big eyes.

We can't have a pet. We already have a baby.

I know, N says, and puts down the mini-kangaroo.

The mini-kangaroo hops a few paces then settles on its haunches to watch them. N finds a rock the size of a fist.

Watch your eyes, N says, and tries to smash a bone.

The bones don't smash easily. N works at it for a few minutes, then smashes a finger.

Fuck, N says, dropping the rock.

The baby laughs.

I'll try.

J smashes bones for a while.

Let's not smash the skull.

The skull is the easiest thing to identify.

I know. That's why it seems wrong.

N picks up the skull. Flakes of burnt skin are still stuck to it. It's missing a few teeth.

It's got a nice feel to it.

J shrugs.

We'll keep the skull.

J looks at the splintered bones scattered across the stone.

Let's just bury it and go.

They dig a hole and put the pile of splintered bones in it. They shove dirt in the hole and pack it down. N jumps on the fresh dirt and the mini-kangaroo does too. J and the baby laugh at them.

The mini-kangaroo kicks N in the shins and hops away.

Fuck you too, N calls after it, and J picks up the baby and they walk back to the car. They put the dog skull on the dashboard beside the taxidermied squirrel.

\*

The baby is asleep, drooling on the car seat. N is driving.

We should stop soon.

Why?

I don't know.

The road is empty except for them, parts along the side washed out. There are roads leading to what used to be neighborhoods. Now there are only thin tarmac streets, one house every ten or more miles, some with lights on when they are occupied by people who have been relocated. The road stretches out ahead and behind in an uninteresting way. They reach an overpass, roads crossing over and under them. N pulls over.

Smoke?

Yeah.

They crack the windows and leave the baby sleeping in the backseat. N sits on the edge of the overpass, feet swinging out over the concrete road beneath them. J leans against the rail and stares down to the cracked roadway.

How do we get there?

I don't know if we can.

They smoke, watching the distant lights from the city and the sparks further away. An animal like a large cat but with the wrong kind of tail slinks across a road below them. One of the roads is broken, huge chunks crumbling away, rebar sticking out of the concrete. Small dark creatures move around in the shadows. Something makes a noise like something hunting.

\*

They camp next to the car. N builds a fire and J sets up a tent. The baby sits on the ground and picks up fistfuls of gravel. J puts a tent pole in the wrong sleeve on the tent. The baby puts gravel in its mouth. N takes the gravel out of the baby's mouth. The baby cries.

Fucking baby, J says, taking the pole out of the wrong sleeve and putting it in a different wrong sleeve.

This is why we agreed we'd never have kids.

I don't think it is, J says, finding the right sleeve for the pole.

\*

They stay in the same place for a few days, camped next to the road. No one drives past. J and N talk about moving every day. They sort through their belongings and argue about what is important. At the end of each day, they toss everything back into the trunk of the car and start again the next morning. They are running low on cigarettes and coffee. They spend as much of the day sleeping as they can. The baby cries non-stop and they can't figure out why until it bites N's finger.

This baby has teeth.

Teeth?

Yeah, those hard bone things in your mouth? This baby has some growing out of its gums.

What does that mean?

It's not as much of a baby anymore?

The baby hits N in the face and laughs.

No, J says, It's still a baby.

\*

Sometimes, I miss my job.

Really?

No. But it seems like I should.

Sometimes, I miss our house in the same way.

I miss our apartment for real.

It was a shitty apartment.

But it was our apartment.

Not really. But it felt like it was ours.

Some days, when I came home, I felt like a stranger.

Some days, when I came home, I had to walk through each room, touching everything,  
until it felt familiar again.

Some days, I wasn't sure I'd gone to the right place.

Some days, I'd stare at all the food in the kitchen and not remember choosing any of it.

I hated the color of the counters in the kitchen.

What color were they?

I don't remember. But I know that I hated it.

\*

They've been camped in the same spot for a week. They half live in the tent and half live in the  
car.

If we don't leave soon, we won't leave.

I know.

They are trying to bathe the baby in a bucket. The baby knocks over the bucket and crawls away,  
dirt turning to mud on its wet skin.

Fucking baby.

\*

The tent is small, warm, and reminds them of their closet in the city. As soon as it gets dark they curl up inside. Sometimes, they don't even wait for it to get dark. They sit in a pile of blankets, the door of the tent flapping open. Their bodies cast shadows on the walls. The baby watches the shadows.

I remember a yellow poncho. It might have belonged to a friend, or a stranger on the other side of the street.

I remember real rainstorms. I miss those.

I remember catching frogs in the swamp.

When did you ever go to a swamp?

When did you ever see a rainstorm?

I've never seen anything as bright as that yellow poncho.

\*

J can't find the baby.

N, J says, Have you seen the baby?

No. Where did you leave it?

It was sitting in its car seat, I just turned around for a minute.

It can't have gone far, it's pretty small.

Yeah, but it moves fast.

They circle their camp area. N looks under the car. J looks in the tent. N hears baby noises from inside the car and finds the baby sitting on the floor, chewing on a seatbelt.

I told you it couldn't get far, N says.

\*

It's getting cold. J builds a fire. They sit in front of the fire, eat dinner, then put the fire out and go to bed. It's hard to sleep in a tent with a baby. The baby is always wide awake when they're ready for bed and crawls on top of them, pokes them in the face, gets tangled in blankets, falls over and cries. It throws its body around and makes grunting noises and kicks them. Tonight the baby sits on J's chest and looks at its hands and talks to J about its hands. J ignores it and tries to sleep.

Remember when it used to be just us in a bed?

It's like a dream.

I'm not even thinking about sex, just sleeping in a bed with one other person.

Just sleeping in a bed.

\*

They drive again. They stop to pee and eat and once because they think they see a dog, but it turns out to be a big rat. They drive into the night, then through the night, then before it's morning the car runs out of gas. In the dim light they can make out shapes like buildings.

It's a house.

It's a lot of houses.

They get the baby out of the car and walk toward the houses. It's an entire neighborhood, or most of an entire neighborhood. There are still streets and sidewalks. The houses don't have all of their windows, the porches look questionable, but they are still mostly standing. N walks up the sidewalk to one of the houses. J stands on the road holding the baby. N opens the front door and walks inside, then walks back to the door.

Honey, I'm home! N says.

J laughs and follows N inside. The house smells moldy. There are signs of animals. The carpet squishes in places and sends up dust in others. The rooms are empty. They go through all of them to make sure. They walk through the second and third and fourth houses. All the houses are the same, but the layout in some is the opposite of others. Wall colors and kitchen appliances and carpets are different. After the fourth house they grow bored with empty houses.

\*

They stand at the end of the cul-de-sac and try to remember playing games with the neighborhood kids.

We ran around a lot.

I don't think there was a reason.

There were rules though.

Yes, rules were important.

Someone was It.

What did It do?

I don't remember.

I was never It.

I never played with the neighborhood kids.

Does anyone live in a neighborhood anymore?

The baby is crawling after its own shadow, laughing when it thinks it's going to catch it then crying when the shadow moves again.

\*

One of the houses looks recently occupied. There are broken stools, a table, a fire pit, empty food cans and jugs stamped with the food allotment imprint. The baby eats charcoal, drools, smears charcoal drool on the wall. J tries to scoop the charcoal out of the baby's mouth. N goes into the kitchen.

J — get in here.

J smells cigarette smoke. J leaves the baby on the floor eating charcoal and goes to the kitchen. N is sitting on the counter smoking a cigarette.

I found them in the cupboard. There's coffee, too.

N offers the cigarette to J.

Don't talk, J says, inhaling smoke.

You can't have the whole thing, N says, and takes the cigarette from J's fingers.

J smells the bag of coffee.

Is there anything else?

Matches. Porn. A shitty road map.

J takes the cigarette.

Good porn?

No. Shitty porn.

N takes the cigarette.

Where's the baby?

Eating charcoal.

Okay.

J takes the cigarette.

This doesn't taste stale.

How long do cigarettes last, anyway?

I never kept them around long enough to find out.

The baby crawls around the corner of the doorway into the kitchen. Most of its face is covered in charcoal drool.

It looks cute like that.

The baby uses J's leg to stand and babbles at them.

Seriously, J says, patting the baby's head, This baby is pretty fucking adorable.

It is, but more so when we have cigarettes and coffee.

Imagine how cute it would be if we had whiskey.

\*

N lies in the tent looking at the map that was in the box. It's an old road map, with routes marked in faded highlighter. Someone drew a large asterisk with ball point pen east and a bit north off of I-409. N thinks it might be newer than the other marks on the map.

Maybe it's the compound, N says.

What compound?

One of my black market contacts said people with a baby asked about the compound.

J takes the map from N and looks at it, tracing roads with a fingertip.

Do you think we could follow it?

I don't know. Do you think someone left it on purpose?

I don't know. Do you think there are other people who left the city?

I don't know.

The baby crawls onto N's back, grabs a fistful of shirt and shoves it in its mouth.

Fucking baby, J says, untangling the baby's hand from N's shirt. J lies down and the baby lies down on J's chest, and N folds up the map and cuddles with J and the baby.

\*

They camp near the houses for a few days but they don't go into them again. They spend a lot of time looking at the map. There are place names they think they remember, but they don't know why they would know them. They try to figure out where they are on the map, but they don't know how to. They decide they probably took 96 when they left the city, and choose a town they think the houses used to be part of.

So if we stay on 96 until we reach the turn off for I-409 we'll be headed for the compound.

The asterisk. We'll be headed for the asterisk.

J shoves N's shoulder and N shoves back. They wrestle. The baby climbs on top of them, shrieks and pulls their hair.

Fucking baby, N says.

They lie in a heap on top of the map.

\*

It's a cold day, foggy, almost raining. They huddle under blankets in the tent earlier than normal. The baby is wide awake. J and N take turns making up stories about a place where other people live outside of the city. The baby can't understand, but likes being talked to.

All the rooms are colored.

You can have as many pets as you want.

You can eat whatever you want.

If one of your pets dies, you'll be able to bury it wherever you want.

There aren't any lines to stand in.

You won't need to know your registration number, because you won't have one.

Not even a fake one.

You will never run out of cigarettes.

There will be so much whiskey.

So much whiskey.

They think about whiskey and no registration numbers and every room painted a different color and fall asleep in a pile.

\*

J is trying to form equal piles of supplies. The baby keeps finding things it's seen every day since they left the city but now finds fascinating. It grabs a can of soup. N takes the can away from the baby and puts it back in a pile.

Wrong pile, J says, That's the pile of stuff we might not take.

That's a lot of stuff.

I know. We didn't think this part through.

There's a lot we didn't think through, N says and looks at the baby.

I need a cigarette.

They sit with the baby next to the piles of supplies and smoke. Then they get serious. They divide things evenly and put it into their packs. They make a kind of harness so they can wear the

baby. N puts the dog's skull in one of the packs. By the time they've finished it's nearly dark.

They unpack everything and set up camp again.

I'll miss the car.

Mhm, J says, half asleep. It's a pretty nice car.

N laughs.

It's a piece of shit car, is what it is.

Don't swear in front of the baby.

N pulls the blanket over J's face, and the baby laughs.

\*

J helps N with a pack and then struggles into the other one. N straps the baby into its harness and then J helps strap the harness to N's chest. The baby squirms against N's chest and cries.

We'll have to switch a lot.

That pack of cigarettes won't last long.

They start walking down the road.

I miss the dog.

Do you want to carry the skull?

\*

They get faster at setting up camp. Every other day J and N share a cigarette until the pack is gone. They don't ration the coffee. One morning before they start walking, N loops a string through the eye sockets of the dog skull and wears it like a talisman. It's large against N's chest, like an animal growing out of N's body.

Why?

To ward off minor officials.

Won't the dog bring them to us?

Wasn't it the absence of the dog bringing them to us?

After a few days, the dog skull hanging against N's chest seems normal. At night, they hang it from the top of the tent.

\*

In the distance, they hear a car. They hide in the tall grass on either side of what they think is I-409. They had reached what they thought was the turn off the day before, but there weren't any signs, just metal pylons twisted on the ground. Crouched in the grass, it doesn't feel so tall. It barely feels like they're hiding. The baby makes noises like it's going to cry, and J covers its mouth. The baby doesn't like having its mouth covered, but right before it can get too angry the car noises fade and J lets go. The baby takes a deep breath and screams.

Well, now they know where we are.

They stand up, N straps on the screaming baby, and they start walking down what is maybe I-409.

\*

The baby takes its first steps in an empty shoe store in a partially demolished strip mall. N and J are busy searching for things like cigarettes or coffee or maybe even whiskey.

What's the baby doing?

N looks over. The baby is crawling around tumbled shelving units. It's holding on to a piece of shelving and wiggling back and forth.

Trying to impale itself, I think.

J walks over to the baby to pick it up, but the baby sees J's outstretched arms and lets go of the shelf, takes two steps towards J and falls. J crouches down to watch it.

Did you see that N?

I saw it.

They watch the baby, picking up a rock or piece of metal and waving it at them.

It's trying to walk.

Should we help it?

Let's leave it alone for now.

They search the empty stores. They find an unidentifiable animal skeleton, a living weasel, and rusted out industrial sized ovens but nothing interesting. In the middle of a home goods store, the baby takes wobbly steps between them, falling into their arms with frustrated screeches. They laugh at it, and clap for it, and it gets so excited that sometimes it falls over before it even tries to take a step.

Learn to walk, baby, N says, turning it around to face J, We're tired of carrying you.

N catches the baby before it falls and sets it back on its feet.

Babies are inconvenient.

Poorly designed.

The baby staggers into J's outstretched arms and J and N clap for it.

Good job, J says.

Do it again, N says. God, we sound like idiots.

The baby shoves its hand in its mouth and drools and laughs at them.

It's like talking to the dog, except with less intelligent eyes.

The baby shoves the other hand in its mouth, takes two steps towards N, and falls.

That's enough baby walking practice for today, I'm getting bored.

If it gets too tired, it will cry.

They camp for the night in one of the store fronts. N finds a spot for the dog skull so it looks down on them. The baby reaches for the skull, giggling, until it realizes it can't get it. Then the baby cries.

You're not allowed to have so many feelings, J says.

\*

They keep walking. Buildings stop being unusual. They walk through empty towns and neighborhoods. They still look for useful things, but they stop looking carefully. They find a house they like. Its layout reminds them of their apartment in the city, only magnified and repeated. They camp there for three days. They talk about how they would decorate and furnish the rooms. At night, there is nothing to do. On the third day they hear a patrol passing, and in the morning they leave.

\*

I remember coming home on a cold day.

I remember walking through the door after work and it was like work never existed.

That moment of unlocking the door.

The smell that you forgot, but then was there after a few days away.

I remember feeling like I was part of the space.

I remember feeling like everything was going to be okay.

But everything wasn't okay.

I never felt we belonged in our apartment.

Sometimes, I would fall asleep on the couch, and wake up, and not know where I was.

Sometimes, when I was at work, I would notice a scent that smelled like home.

I don't miss any of that.

No. But I think I miss something.

\*

The day they find the river is the day the baby says its first word. They hear the river before they see it. They walk through stunted trees, the undergrowth getting thinner, the river getting louder. At the edge, they watch water falling over rocks, frothing over pebbles. They walk along the edge until they find a sheltered area between some rocks where it isn't as loud. They pile their packs on a rock and strip off their clothes and sit in the shallow water. The baby cries because it's cold until it sees the pebbles under its feet. Then it coos to the pebbles and tries to pick them up, but the water is too deep for it to reach them without getting its face wet. N hands a pebble to the baby. The baby puts the pebble in its mouth.

Really, J says, taking the rock out of the baby's mouth, What did you expect?

They let the water swirl against their thighs.

Do you think this is the same river where we tried to get rid of the dog?

Probably.

How many rivers can there be, really?

I don't remember any others.

N takes off the dog skull and sets it on top of their pile of belongings.

Good dog.

It's like it's guarding us.

Or doing that thing where it sits and stares at us until we feed it.

God, I hated when it did that.

The baby points to the dog skull on the rock behind N.

Dog, the baby says.

Yes, J says, Dog.

It's a dead dog, N says.

Dog, the baby says again, and laughs and falls down and water splashes its face and it cries. It reaches for the skull, still crying.

Dog, the baby says, Dog. Dog. Dog.

N hands the skull to the baby. The skull is only a little bit smaller than the baby's head. The baby holds the skull in two hands and sucks on the smooth round part of bone.

\*

They follow the river. N throws the shitty map into the fire and holds J and the baby while the map crinkles, turn blacks, flakes away in ashes. They keep going. When they stop to eat, they let the baby wear the dog's skull around its neck. The skull covers the baby's torso and knocks against its knees. It laughs at it when it walks. The baby is pretty good at walking now, stumbling around like a miniature drunk.

\*

Do you remember summer days at the river?

Rock hopping.

Collecting pebbles.

Sitting on rocks hot from the sun.

Catching minnows, or was it crayfish?

Both, I think.

Do you remember what a crayfish looks like?

I don't think I ever saw one.

A patrol passes overhead.

\*

It takes them a few days before they realize that when the baby makes N noises and J noises it's talking to them.

It said N first, says N.

Pretty sure it said J first, says J.

Dog, says the baby.

\*

The trees and bushes they have been walking through give way to scrubby saplings and coarse grasses. The river narrows and picks up speed. It spills out and down into a lake that catches them by surprise. The scrub forest marches along the lake's edge, diminishing until it is only a smooth expanse of tall grass and a steep hill on the edge of the lake. On the other side of the lake, running up and over the hill, is a tall, chain link fence. N and J and the baby stand in the shadows of the thinning trees and stare at the fence. They walk back along their side of the lake, into the thicker trees. At night, patrols fly overhead, their lights flash against the fence and turn back towards the city.

\*

It's morning. The tent is growing hot in the sun but they don't get up. They lie curled into each other and the blankets. The baby is cranky. It cries, stumbles around the tent, says their names mixed with meaningless sounds. It rubs its hands in its eyes, its face, smears snot on its cheeks. J and N don't care.

I wish the baby didn't make so much noise.

I wish the baby didn't move around so much.

I wish the baby wasn't here.

I never wished the dog wasn't there.

Every morning when we didn't have to work you said you wished we didn't have a dog.

That was only because it woke us up.

Do you remember being a baby?

No one remembers being a baby.

I don't remember any babies, besides this one.

Didn't we have some friends that had a baby?

I thought they had a monkey?

No, those were different friends. And it was a chinchilla.

I wish we had wine.

I wish we had whiskey.

I wish a lot of things were different.

We've always wished that.

\*

They are sitting with their backs to a rock, looking out over the lake. The hill and the fence are hidden from their view. Every hour, or what they think is every hour, a patrol flies overhead, reaches the fence, turns back toward the city.

Once, I went on a fishing trip on a lake and caught a carp. But it was so large that its eyes had feeling so I threw it back.

Once, I went swimming in a lake. When I climbed out of the water my legs were covered in leeches. I pulled them off with a paper towel and there was so much blood.

Once, I walked across a frozen lake. There was a rabbit frozen in the ice, facing the shore.

Once, I took a canoe out on a lake on a windy day and lost my paddle. I was alone and the boat was light. The wind blew me to the opposite shore.

Once, someone told me that someone we knew drowned in a lake. I didn't believe them. I didn't think that lakes were real.

I haven't seen a real lake until now.

I thought it would be more dramatic.

I thought there would be waves.

This lake is kind of boring.

I preferred the river.

\*

They stay at their camping spot for a long time.

It feels like we are back in the city, but there are no buildings to break into.

There's nothing to drink.

Nothing to smoke.

No dog.

There's a baby.

There's a fence.

The baby trips over the edge of the tent and cries.

Fucking baby.

N picks up the baby, holds it until it stops crying. The baby offers N the dog skull.

Thanks, N says.

J doesn't say anything.

\*

The length of time between patrols is just enough to grow used to the silence and then there is another patrol again.

Remember cigarettes?

How it felt to hold one between your fingers.

That first inhale.

That first exhale.

God.

Towards the end, when sometimes you could feel the ember growing closer to your lips.

The rush.

The burn.

Sometimes, at work, I would go for a smoke break just to feel that burn so I would remember that I was alive.

I always imagined the smoke swirling around in my lungs, that I could feel it.

It was almost worth living in the city, to smoke.

Except most cigarettes weren't that great.

Yeah. The one you'd light, then regret.

The one that half way through you realized wasn't going to cut it.

Smoking two or three in a row and not feeling any better.

The baby is sucking on the dog skull, wandering by the edge of the lake. It trips over a branch and falls face first into the water.

Do you think it will stand up on its own, or should I go and get it?

Let's give it a moment.

They watch the baby climb to its hands and knees in the shallow water. It cries.

God, I want a cigarette.

\*

They decide that they are going to climb the fence. They pack up their belongings, walk along the lake shore toward the hill. At the bottom of the hill they pause. The grass waves in the wind and every time shadows move across it they look at the sky expecting a patrol. The tall grass seems ominous. Neither one of them wants to make the first move. A patrol passes over them, reaches the fence, turns back.

Okay, N says, and touches the dog skull.

Right, J says, and touches the dog skull.

Dog, the baby says, and touches the dog skull.

They start walking up the hill.

Nothing happens. The grass moves gently, the sky stays overcast and empty. It seems to take forever to climb the hill. It's steep and ridge-like. A worn dirt path runs along the top and it makes them uneasy and excited. They walk along the path to the fence. Rusted No Trespassing signs lie on the ground. There's a deep hole under the fence. N climbs into the hole and under the fence. J passes the packs and the baby under the fence and then climbs through too. They look out through the fence at the grass, lake, trees — and then they keep walking.

\*

In the distance are buildings. The baby is asleep on J's shoulder. The baby is getting big and getting difficult to carry. J passes the baby to N. The buildings take shape, eight of them, forming a rectangle around an expanse of dirt, empty except for a tall pole. They reach the first building. It's empty. The baby is restless, so they leave it outside in the dirt while they explore the other buildings. They are empty. They look like they have always been empty. The baby stands by the pole, eating dirt.

Well?

N picks up the baby.

Fuck it.

The baby touches the skull on N's chest.

The baby says

Dog.



## Everything Between:

### Poetics Statement

I'm sitting under my desk with my laptop and the dog. Partly because the dog is making it clear that he feels neglected. But mostly because I like sitting in new places and I've never grown out of blanket forts and secret spaces. I like feeling closed in. Except when I like feeling small somewhere huge.

I've been giving myself pep talks all morning: If you get out of bed now, you'll have the whole morning ahead of you. If you take the dog for a walk now, you can drink your coffee in peace. You said you were going to write, so you should probably sit down and do that. Little chats like this are sometimes the thing that gets me through the day. But now it's noon.

I had so many more interesting thoughts earlier, when the idea of writing was too much to face.

I don't know where to begin. That's why I'm beginning here.

But maybe this isn't the beginning because I don't know much about beginnings. I know about starting over and I know about change and I know about failure. But beginnings not so much.

There's a lot that I want this work to say and do, a lot of thoughts I want to put together, a way I want to tell them. But right now I don't give a fuck.

I want to be wearing different clothes. I want to be naked. I want to be smoking in only a shirt and underwear. I want to be drinking wine. I want to be turning away from the window to another person still lying in bed. I want to be a thousand miles and lives away from this one.

There was a time when I lived in a different place, had a different desk, a different window. I would sit on the desk beside the open window and smoke. I was losing a lot of things at the time, and it was nice to find small things: the window without a screen, a black walnut floating in a lake, notes from ex lovers that I could burn.

And really, what would be the harm in spending the day in bed?

At first I thought I was writing a short story. I used letters as placeholders for names. I didn't give them genders, because I didn't know their genders. I thought I would go back and fill things in. But then it was something else, a different story, and I couldn't go back.

I had these images in mind, and wrote towards them. I wasn't sure they all went together, but it turned out that they did: a baby showing up one morning, a fence on a hill, cutting off a corpse's thumb with a steak knife, an abandoned museum. When I began writing, another baby and a child appeared too. I thought the number of children would grow, that J and N would be leading them or keeping them safe or something.

But that wasn't what I was writing.

The second baby was the first to go. And then the kid. I wasn't sure about getting rid of the kid at first, there were some bits with the kid that I liked. But it was surprisingly easy to get rid of it. It felt right. Just J and N and the baby.

Well, and the dog. I don't know where the dog came from, I was just writing and then it was there, a dead dog they were throwing into the river.

I keep silent so often because what I think has already been said, or it seems as if the world wouldn't mind if it was left unsaid. I have been writing the same thing so many times, in so many ways, but cannot stop writing it. I want to write it in a new way, but don't know how to. I still do not know what it is I want to say.

"I think constantly about connection and loneliness and community and belonging," Roxane Gay writes in *Bad Feminist*, "and a great deal, perhaps too much, of how my writing evidences me

working through the intersections of these things...I tell some of the same stories over and over because certain experiences have affected me profoundly. Sometimes, I hope that by telling these stories again and again, I will have a better understanding of how the world works.”

See, Gay has already written this for me. But I will keep writing about un-gendered shadowy characters, about searching and wandering but looking for nothing, about fucking and drinking and smoking, about dead dogs and sudden babies and broken buildings. What if I write enough?

When I was little, I obsessively imagined the public spaces I was in abandoned and empty. I dreamt of being given a mall, all the stores intact, no one there but me. I wasn't interested in the toys and things. It was the structure I wanted to myself: atriums, reflection pools, escalators and echoing food court. The desolation and emptiness.

On hikes, when we stumbled on abandoned homesteads and tumbled down barns, I made sure I was the last to leave. I wanted to stand in the decay. It felt something like being home. Or maybe it was a desire for home. Nostalgia for things that never were.

I don't want to assign meaning to what I've written. I don't want to say: J and N are searching for home. I don't want to say: J and N are trying to remember something they have never had. I don't want to say: J and N find belonging in desolation and being separated from other people.

None of those are what I was writing.

But in a way, all of those could be things that I wrote.

For a long time, my car was what I thought of as home. It was safety and escape. Parking on a back road and smoking. Sitting in the car in the driveway until I could face walking inside. Driving nowhere. Lunch breaks in the car in the parking lot. Sleeping in the car leaving one failed endeavor for another.

But now I don't have a car and this computer has become my home. Sometimes, I browse the internet, and it is boring and I wonder why I am still on my computer. But it's not the internet I want to make me happy. It's the computer itself. I need more time with the keypad and keyboard. Sometimes, I run my fingertips over the keys, swipe across the mousepad, just for the tactile sensation of home.

Home cannot be confused with family, biological or chosen. It isn't community. Home is a sense that mostly has nothing to do with a place or a person and don't give me that bullshit about the heart.

Home is something unexpected. Home hurts because it is so tantalizing. It is found in cigarettes or headphones or the way headlights shine on wet bus windows. Home is smells — and not smells from childhood either. I don't mean home is nostalgia. It's belonging on a molecular level. Something inside shifts.

I want to be home beyond the computer screen, a car, a cigarette tip, a bottle being opened, broken floors. But that is all I have found that says 'home'. My molecules are restless.

I read a lot about feminism and gender but I don't have a definition of what it means to be a woman. I know the constructs. I recognize effects on my life for existing in a female body. But being a woman?

My first college roommate loved being a woman. She felt she had some spark, some thing that she shared with other women. Something that drew them together. "I just love time with other women," she would say.

I do not understand this.

I didn't give J and N genders because I didn't know their genders. Then I decided that I liked it that way. Then it became important.

As a child, my favorite movie was Disney's *Robin Hood*. The one with the fox. I knew he was an animal, but I didn't see him as animal. I knew he was a male, but I didn't see him as male.

It's not that I wanted to be a boy when I was little. I used to think that pretty often. I'd pause in the middle of whatever make believe game I was playing and ask myself why I was always pretending to be a boy.

—*Do you want to be a boy?* I'd ask my seven year old self. —*No.* Seven year old me would say.  
—*So why don't you pretend to be a girl?* —*Because girls don't get to do the fun things.* —*But you are a girl.* —*But I'm a different kind of girl,* I said.

It wasn't that I wanted to be a boy. I just didn't want to be a girl. That's why I liked the word 'Tomboy.' It was a word for a girl that didn't say 'girl'. My mother didn't like it when people called me a tomboy. But it was my secret name for myself. I'm a tomboy, I'd tell myself.

But mostly I didn't think too much about it, and just went on pretending to be a boy, a nameless boy called Rebecca.

I am thinking about names. My mother told me that my birth name means *enchantress*. But when I looked it up in middle school I found that it meant *to bind or to snare*.

Snares are simple and easy. Anyone can make them. They are highly effective. They catch you by the neck. The more you fight them the tighter they grow. If it is a free-running snare when you stop pulling it allows you to breathe.

J and N. Initials began as stand ins, to write about shadowy characters I didn't know. But have the letters become names? What if I had called them G and L. Or M and P. Letters have their own lives. Feel them in your mouth as you say them: A. B. C. D. They have their own associations: A is for Apple, B is for Ball. J is for Jam and N is for Nest. But J is also for judiciary, jape, juxtaposition and both jill and jack. N is for nowhere, nuzzle, nomenclature, nancy and nymphomaniac.

My mother has said that she would have spelled my name R-e-b-e-k-a-h if she had been reading the King James translation of the Bible when I was born. But she was only reading the NIV. I was envious of girls who spelled their name with a k and an h.

I thought, when I was in kindergarten, that I would like to be a Becky. It sounded brash. Daring. But mostly, I knew my mother didn't want me to be called Becky. Rebecca was a beautiful name, she liked to say. Becky wasn't.

I didn't want to be beautiful.

I remember a conversation with a friend and her mother in high school. We were talking about the difficulty of naming the characters we wrote about. Her mother wanted to know why we couldn't just use place holders. "Call them Jane and Joe until you figure it out," she said. But no, we said, the name changes the character. It was an insurmountable block to beginning a story. Without names, there were no characters. Without characters, there was no story. So many stories we started and couldn't finish, because we never discovered the names.

The story of my name is simple and convoluted. Breka, baby name sites say, comes from the Irish name Breck, meaning freckled or speckled. Breck is both a masculine and feminine name. Breca the Bronding challenges Beowulf to a swimming match in full armor. The outcome is uncertain — Unferth claims Breca won. Beowulf points out that while Breca made it to shore days before him, Beowulf killed nine sea monsters. There is controversy over translation — was it a swimming match, or a rowing match? Searching for the origin or meaning of the name Breca in Old English offers no results. But the verb *brecan* means to break, to burst through, to violate, and creates the noun *breca*, a breaker, violator.

The simple story of my name is a typo during a late night AIM conversation in high school. But I know that I was reading Beowulf when my fingers slipped on the keys.

I worried about the plot at first. I left myself a lot of paranoid notes, things like:

"There needs to be more fear, greater worry that something bad is going to happen."

And:

“I need more going on than just them driving around and the dog’s body and flashbacks. There needs to be story.”

But why. Why did I feel that way. Because story wasn’t what I meant when I wrote that; I meant plot. And I only thought that there needed to be plot because I had been told that there needed to be plot, that characters need to change, that a climax should lead to a resolution. But there was always story. Life is a story, and has no plot. It is more interesting to explore those spaces that plot ignores. What about a life with no climax, no resolution. And fuck life, just ideas.

There is a note in my phone from one night when I was waiting at the bus stop and it was dark and raining. “The meaning of babies vs. their reality” the note says.

Once I was writing a book with a baby in it, I found babies everywhere. On the bus, in the store, screaming in the home across the parking lot, in my friends’ apartments. I had not realized I was so confused by babies until I was writing about a baby. They stopped making sense. Why would people have them. The more I thought about babies, the less I understood them.

There are a number of dead babies in my past. Let’s leave the number at two, though.

The first was my twin. I remember my mother and grandmother talking, my grandmother saying that my mother cried when it was dead, my mother saying no, she didn't, it wasn't far enough along to even look like a baby. I remember, even less clearly, asking my mother about it some other time, and her response making it very clear that discussing that dead fetus was not an option. I never asked her about it again, but I thought about it often.

I don't know the truth behind the twin. I could have made the whole thing up. That conversation between my mother and grandmother may never have happened.

The other dead baby was a miscarriage my mother had. I had been happy to know she was pregnant, because I had decided that a baby would fix our family. When my mother told my sister and I that we wouldn't be having a new little brother or sister, she sat on the bed with my sister and they cried. I brought them toilet paper. I felt guilty that I wasn't crying. When a baby finally did come along, I realized quickly that it wasn't going to fix anything.

Now I am writing about a baby and I do not understand.

I'm tired of my prose being called poetry. Of my writing being treated differently when someone has decided that it is poetry. I want everything between, on edges.

“Edges involve extremes. Edges are borders,” writes Ali Smith in *Artful*, “Edges are very much about identity, about who you are.”

Smith writes a lot about *Oliver Twist*. I was never too interested in Oliver, but I loved the Artful Dodger. Something about thieves, about taking a wrong act but not being cruel, like stretching or fabricating the truth. I liked the edges of identity, the not yet but almost, the wavering, the possibility.

When I was young I read fantasy for the same reason, the sense of almost but not. But the richness and details of other worlds left me exhausted. I retreated to my own fantasies of unformed blankness — the house stripped of furniture the world of color — and I moved in some existence between dream and reality.

I’ve been thinking a lot about inherited memories. Those things that we know or ought to know, the memories that aren’t ours from experience but have still taken a hold on us.

I was reading about the neuroanatomy of memory and dreaming on Wikipedia and then somehow I was watching clips of Sergei Polunin dancing on YouTube. Ballet is one of those things that makes me long for something I have never had, like a genetic memory. Because others can dance like that, part of me knows how it must feel.

But what I really want to be writing about is dreams and memories and lack of distinction between them. Generating from similar places (neurologically speaking) dreams are as finicky as memories and memories are as unreliable as dreams. Both can be difficult to distinguish from reality. Both can be a terrifying form of truth.

I wanted the reader to be lost in a maze but not entirely lost. Theseus with his string, or maybe more Hansel and Gretel with a half eaten bread trail. I like the disconcerting, the time without a referent. And I suppose it's a desire for things to fall apart, for the center not to hold.

But still, for the center to hold.

Or maybe it is just that lately time has been so difficult to grasp that imposing strict narrative and linearity felt wrong.

When did time become so difficult? It seems it started when my grandparents began to die, when my other grandmother had dementia. Weekly, surreal conversations over watery tea in her kitchen. And then those conversation were gone and she was silent and dead.

Next were years moving from place to place and person to person. But time wasn't a problem then. I could tell anyone that asked all of the addresses of the homes I had lived in. I knew when I moved from where to where, and which job followed which.

It was when my grandparents on the other side of the family were dying that even the present couldn't keep time in order. Did my grandfather die in the autumn or the winter? I left where I was in October and was with him for several months, but I would have sworn he died when the leaves were golden. And by November in Pennsylvania, nothing has any color.

I do not know how long my grandparents have been dead. How long was the time between their deaths? And when did my grandmother die? I was working on a landscaping crew, trimming a rose bush when my phone rang and it was my mother. I know it was a rose bush, because my grandmother loved roses. I thought I could keep working after the phone call. But there was the rosebush and I went home.

So if there were roses, and landscaping, it must have been summer. But roses grow all the time in Seattle, and at her funeral in Pennsylvania I wore a sweater and boots and my legs were cold. The cousins had a fire and we drank and smoked and avoided saying all the things we knew were true.

Maybe it was the loss of that generation, the center of a family that never felt like my center, but held me together in ways I didn't know. Whatever it was, time acts oddly now. It gets folded up a lot, except when it stretches out too thin.

It was that. What I was writing about, I mean. Not that anything equals my grandmother, or lost generations, or centers or family or the fabric of space and time. But the loss of the thing that

makes sense of time. That's gone now. And in its place, only memories of the memories I should have.

I wanted to write a story, and my own is tied to what I write.

This is getting maudlin.

I remember in high school, when a friend read one of my favorite Tennyson poems and said 'It's a bit maudlin, don't you think?' I was offended on Tennyson's behalf.

It's hard to avoid maudlin, when someone is recently dead.

And two years is recent. Six years is recent. It takes twelve years for a body to become a skeleton. And if it's in a coffin, it takes longer. And the skeleton maybe won't decompose for hundreds or more years.

But then, my grandparents were cremated.

Things I have googled while writing this manuscript:

How long does it take for a whale to decompose

How long does it take to burn a body

Burnt dog body

At what temperature do bones burn

What does a burning dog smell like

Burnt dog remains

Whale skeleton

Stages of decay in urban sites

Abandoned library

Abandoned movie theater

Cats eating dead humans

Coatimundi

Slow Loris

Sloth

Sloth wearing clothing

When does a baby start to walk

Babies learning to walk

At what age do babies grow teeth

At what age do babies say their first word

Babies talking

Babies being weird

Babies being stupid

Plural of platypus

Force needed to smash bones

Kangaroo

Kangaroo wearing clothes

Taxidermy

Abandoned museum

Can guinea pigs mate with rats

Do dead people and dead animals smell the same

Can you cut off a thumb with a steak knife

Rate of decomposition of submerged body

Part of the brain involved in memory

My brain tonight feels like an overly tired child: it won't stop, even though it no longer functions. This is a place of productivity and creativity and a place of neither. I am not fully awake but I am not asleep. I am not incoherent, but I am not coherent. I question my own sense of reality, my own grasp on the passage of time.

Why was I so caught up in the "real story"? So certain there was something to be told. So certain there needed to be something holding things together. Where does this desire come from, the desire to impose meaning or narrative on something that resists such impositions. The desire to create a center when something has no center. A threat to our understanding, or, more, a threat to our ways of understanding.

Really, I am more interested in things falling apart, the moments right before or right after or right when the center is gone. In that moment of discovery or sudden change there is a moment that feels closest to truth. The building excitement that you are about to get it.

For a month in my second quarter of graduate school I was fascinated with memento mori, deathbed photos and mortuary science.

By “a month in my second quarter of graduate school” I mean since I was in elementary school, curating an animal graveyard in the backyard. In middle school, I collected squirrel tails and kept them next to my pillow. In high school, I found a fox skull and kept it on my desk. Death didn’t frighten me, because it went hand in hand with decay, and I felt at home with decay. I was also young, and death seemed very distant.

This is tangential, but it is hard to write about writing without getting sidetracked.

My family has a long running joke about taxidermied grandparents. It’s still funny, even though all my grandparents are dead.

I’m afraid I’m a lazy writer. I think about writing a lot but I don’t write a lot.

I always seem to know exactly what I will write when I am walking the dog or taking a shower or smoking on the balcony. And sometimes I have a notebook or at least my phone but then the

words are hard to create — physically it is difficult — and then when they are on the page they aren't the things I saw in my head.

Sometimes it is so difficult that it grows painful and this becomes enjoyable. Sometimes it is enjoyable without being painful and then I assume the writing is very bad.

Did I expect my writing to get so strange? It doesn't feel so strange to me. No stranger than life, if you look at it closely. It's the draw of the surrealists — the true bizarreness of living, no holds barred, no need to pretend it's under control.

Or at least, this is what I wanted to write.

I wanted to write about confusion, bewilderment, uncertainty and multiplicity. I wanted to write something that would leave the reader lost, that would create that kind of vertigo where understanding but not clarity happens. I wanted a story and characters as amorphous as identity. I wanted to create something liminal and between.

But I also wanted to write a story. I wanted to balance on the edge of nonsense without falling into sense or nonsensical nothing.

I think.

Perhaps it is not between enough.

In some ways, N and J aren't that different from the versions of myself I played in childhood.

Are they trapped or liberated? Lost or found? Here or there? Numb or emotional?

I couldn't say.

I have been working on this bottle of wine all day. Drinking straight from the bottle, because I am home and not wearing pants and why dirty the glass. I am nearly finished with the bottle and already I am missing it.

I remember one night with my cousin in the kitchen making crepes. I had just read an essay about cooking being like sex, good food and good sex being the only two things that satisfy on so many levels. We kept joking about how good we were in the kitchen, and I'm not trying to say there was anything sexual between my cousin and I, but all the same, it was sexual.

Writing is like that.

I'm not interested in speculation except in a way that is like childhood — distant enough from reality, close enough to shadows. I'm more interested in the past and the disruption of time than the future and movement. Except where they collide.

I don't like when people ask what my writing is about. I don't know how to answer. Sometimes I think I know what I am writing about. Sometimes I don't think I am writing about the things I think I am writing about, I am just thinking about them. Sometimes I think I am writing to discover what I am writing about. But maybe I am not writing about anything. Maybe I am just writing. Is that enough?

I printed off the most recent version of my manuscript tonight. I cannot justify this action, the use of paper and ink. I just need something physical. To be able to lay something out on the floor or cut it up or rearrange it, to set a glass of wine on top of it and say, yes.

## Works Cited

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Smith, Ali. *Artful*. London: Penguin, 2012. Print.