CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Liam Lachance

Entitled: “Love Memory”

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (English)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

Andre Furlani _____ Chair

Josip Novakovich _____ Examiner

Mikhail Iossel _____ Examiner

Kate Sterns _____ Supervisor

LOVE MEMORY

Liam Lachance

A Thesis

In

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree Master of Arts (English) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

May 2017

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank many friends who provided support during the writing process, namely Charles Gonsalves and Torin Mclachlan. I'd also like to thank Terry Byrnes for his advice in workshopping earlier sections of the work, the patience and edits from Kate Sterns, and Josip Novakovich and Mikhail Iossel for their time in reviewing the work. Finally, I'd like to thank Concordia's English Department and the School of Graduate Studies for their support—particularly the supporters of the Lynne Cassie and Issie Weisglass Award in Creative Writing, an award which allowed me to spend time writing. I'm dedicating the thesis to my father and sister, my past and present wolves Rock and Charles, and Rachelle Denomme.

1

Lily

It happened the day I decided to charge my phone in the bathroom because a man in a viral interview had suggested that the 'inherent attention problems of Millennials' could be solved by moving phones from our beds. I had plugged mine in beneath our claw-foot tub, breaking spider-webs I hadn't considered until having destroyed them. I was sure that Cole must have done so before with his constant sweeping. I lay there, beside the tub, moth to a screen, evidence of the webs stuck slick to my wrist. I lit a roach, and scrolled through the babies of my Instagram feed. I felt guilty. I couldn't figure if it was for smoking in the presence of these digital babies, or because it felt that they could access my camera, finding this grown adult woman curled up on a dark tilted floor. I wondered what their mothers might think. I realized that this is exactly what their mothers might think. *Writer smokes through Monday morning.* Still. Whether their judgment or the babies were real—the Instagram pictures could have been photographs of magazine pages—they disrupted my calm in the room. I thought, as a gesture of good faith, that I might put out the joint. I smoked the rest while considering this act of reconciliation between generations, concluding that I didn't care much for lives that sloshed about without language. Still, I wanted to make sense of these digital babies, advertised across webs of electronic connections. I wrote on my phone about the contrast between their suburban pens and mine. The writing was off—I tried poetry.

babies have it easy

baby me, life is easy,

baby.

I felt something… not enough. For work, I drafted a piece, “God Might Be An Instagram Baby,” and, “10 Reasons You May Be Have Become That Instagram Spammy Mother,” before stopping at the comforting idea that these babies were likely shitting themselves at the moment while I was free to do with my day as I chose; writing in clean pants.

Cole texted me—again.

I decided to take a bath in what I considered the smallest tub in the Plateau. I had to place my legs in one at a time—as if they were made of porcelain—and felt that the operation of placing my body in the tub mimicked pressing a head of broccoli into a shot glass. Today, I submerged with grace. My phone was charging under my ass and the steel of the tub, covered in layers of red and blue paint. I removed the flipped coffee mug from the H tap—placed there so to prevent the spray of loose pipefitting—and realized the digital baby piece might come off as the poverty tourism of so many artists who expound on the perils of having chosen poverty. The water was hot. I slid a bar of beeswax soap over my forearms, shoulders, and breasts, circling my nipples for good measure. The soap and the water mixed together for a sweet smell, and I slipped a hand beneath the water’s surface.

I wondered what it might feel like to be single, what I might do.

A few minutes later, a banging came from the floor—the splashing seemed to have spilled enough that it had leaked down in my neighbour’s bathroom. I leaned out of the tub and hit the floor with my palm in a slow triple banging—mimicking theirs—and then three times very quickly, forcing them to consider whether it was a response, an acknowledgment, or Morse code (this all, of course, depended on their belief in patterns and fate, or in life as a series of

random collisions). I sunk my shoulders back below the warm water, and considered answering Cole's texts.

We'd had an argument about interior design—of all things—how he hated my colourless paintings and fresh, clear style; how he had wanted colours and—for some reason—quotes on the walls. His fury had come out in that type of explosion people have after avoiding a series of minor issues. His life, I knew, was a series of events that could only be framed in dramatic major wins or losses—I wondered how much of this style was unconscious, and how much was planned. I considered reaching for my phone, then thought it better to avoid it; the phone might be swallowed by the water. I realized it was probably easier to write about the mouse that had poked up through the stove that morning than the babies.

I had been reading in the kitchen when it'd popped up through the spiral element to look around the room before pulling up its nose to take me in behind a fan of millimeter whiskers. I had stared back—we had stared at each other for some time. I had looked at it looking at me, and found a part of myself. And then I threw a pen hard against the oven door to warn the thing that this was my space. The mouse disappeared down into the space of the oven. I set a wooden trap on one of the metal spirals. Part of me didn't want to do it, and part of me knew it had to be done. Another part of me liked the adrenaline of holding the trap to place it when it's about to snap.

I knew Cole would disapprove—say something like, "What a place for a life to end, this building;" to distract from his inability to kill mice. I also knew that he would be okay with having the thing magically disappear.

We had been together for a while, now—nine years… I heard crinkling on the element foil. I waited for the snap. Nothing. There was a storm outside, it was in the minus twenties. I considered it might wrong to blame the mouse for wanting to curl against warmth; I thought about the single life of this mouse, the exhausting but occasionally exciting work of searching for companions, only to find me, and my breakfast. The mouse might have a family. Maybe, the mouse should live.

And then a snap: a smash of wood against steel.

I made a splashy show of leaving the tub, and knocked on the floor three long times with my heel (I wondered if, below, they'd been paying attention). Fastball's "Out of My Head" was playing on the Bluetooth speaker above the fridge, connected to Cole's laptop. The room still smelled of breakfast's cinnamon waffles, which had perhaps lured the mouse back for its fateful last trip through the stovepipe… I was wearing the towel—a sad married man across the court was known to stare into my window, over his book—and examined the stovetop: the wooden trap was jammed into the empty space in the center of the curled element, standing upright. I was faced with the blank wooden bottom. The body was hidden. I approached the trap. I breathed in, and passed the side: between metal prong and wood base was the severed end of a gray tail.

I read a text from Cole, got dressed, and decided to travel North to find old paintings to rip out for their frames, before my meeting at the journal. Would, as the virtual guru suggested, my bus ride be more authentic if I left my phone at home? Was heading in the same direction on a bus enough to forge a solidarity with the other passengers, even if we were travelling to different places? I returned to the bathroom and bent down to separate the phone from the charger. The phone lit up, its bluish incandescence cutting into the dark. 11:34.

I noticed that new spider webs had formed. I stood up and set the phone to airplane mode for maximum authenticity, and, when leaving the apartment with a canvas bag for the frames, dropped the mousetrap and tail in a bin at the back of our shared court.

I passed a girl and boy playing in a tree on the front lawn of the famous oratory. The girl seemed to be hiding something from the boy that he was trying to reach—she seemed at that age where girls are taller than their prepubescent counterparts. She held the thing high above his head. He gave up jumping and wrestling with her—she seemed also more fit, agile—and started a funny little dance that made her laugh, drop her hands. I thought how, if sex is treated as a thing for the woman to hold or give away, the fumbles of men will always be violent, whether trained to be vicious or friendly or redeeming or sensitive or aggressive or supportive or understanding or awful or excellent or passive hunters. Then, I noticed that the boy resembled Cole, when he was younger, in the way that he flicked his neck to move hair out of his eyes, and how he lingered after a joke, waiting for a clear form of validation; high five, hug (Cole hasn't lost that flick; it's something that helps separate him from crowds in bars, restaurants, funerals. I'm not sure if he's aware of it, but it's one of the things that most people attempt when doing their best impersonation of him. Their flicks are enough to get a laugh out of me, but nobody has got it quite right, there always seems to be an exaggeration that smothers the life of the original thing. I wonder if anyone can be as authentic as Cole, when he does it, and how that might be complicated by the fact that he might not know he does it—that, if pointed out, he might, too, be unable to do an authentic impression of himself). It was colder outside than I had expected. It was always so cold, and things weren't changing fast enough for my liking.

I was surprised by how cold it was on the bus. I stood there, leaning on a pole in the center, responding to Cole's texts about whether I could walk his friend's dog, this wolf-like thing that seemed fresh from the woods. I liked to walk the dog because it reminded me of home, but it required labour to prepare for the questions or advice from passersby who seemed to think that my walking the animal was a request to hear from them. There was the usual, "but is it right to have such a large animal in the city?"—to which I would respond with either "you're in great shape, you must have a mansion;" or, if I was not feeling their tone, "you're fat, you must live in a closet"—or, the directive, "This is how you hold a leash," which men considered a helpful or romantic gesture, which made me as sad for them as it picked away at my faith in the bumbling gender. Hope, we must have faith. I texted Cole that I could if my meetings at the journal finished on time.

The row of single seats behind the driver was occupied by the eldest, who were reading from their separate phones, books, or tablets, or staring out their sections of a window. I stood between these individuals and a series of people sitting on chairs that folded from the wall, one of which was occupied by a backpack, the owner of which was engrossed in a book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People.* I returned my phone to airplane mode, considering the guru's line about "reconnecting with lost connections—yourself," and noticed the bike accident ahead.

I screamed, and two very drunk white and Asian boys—who I took to be undergraduate students—turned to me, and then followed my pointed finger to the now empty space of the cyclist. Our bus stopped. There was a hearse in front of us, itself about ten cars behind the accident. Sirens pierced the air from where the cyclist had fallen. I saw a helmet being held in the

air. Our driver, a young brown woman sipping a to-go coffee, spoke from the enclosed metal cage.

"*Nous devons attendre un couple de minutes.* We will have to wait a few minutes, everyone."

"At least that guy's not in a rush," said the blonde of the drunk boys in a rural-Anglo accent, pointing to the hearse.

"Why not? He's stuck in a freezing car with a dead man," said the other black-haired boy, in an English inflection that seemed urban Franco-Quebecois.

"Well one of them isn't. And it'll just preserve the body," said the blonde, holding his hands together in a praying motion.

The Franco-Quebecois boy laughed, flat black hair bouncing.

"Can you keep it down?" asked a younger woman in a seat that faced the boys, beside the man reading. Her accent sounded Trini, and I waited her to say more so that I could tell for sure.

"So what I was saying was," continued the blonde, louder than before, "is that people are too sensitive these days."

"We're sensitive to stupidity," said the woman.

The traffic wasn't moving.

Cole texted, *what r u up to?*

The blonde turned to the woman and said, "Excuse me?"

"I called you stupid," said the woman.

"*Madame!"* yelled the blonde.

"*Oui?"* said the driver.

"Nous peut partir ici?" said the blonde.

"*C'est contre la loi*."

"*J'ai besoin de pisse!"* yelled the dark-haired one. "This is my nightmare," he said, more quietly.

"This is our dream," said an elderly white woman with purple hair, seated first behind the driver.

The boys looked ahead, at the accident. I put in my headphones. The headphones were dead. An officer was walking from the accident toward the bus. He was holding a dented white cycling helmet.

I took my phone from airplane mode—the scene was boring me; I felt that I'd seen it too many times—and texted Cole that I was stuck on the bus and couldn't walk the dog. He responded with, *k,* and then, *is this about yesterday*, and then, *lol hello?*

I tried the headphones again; the boys were trying to open the front door, disregarding the bus driver.

I understand why you were angry, but it doesn't mean I have to agree, texted Cole.

k, I responded.

you don't have to be such a bitch about it when I don't say you're right. I feel like you're making shit up just to make me angry tbh, he added.

I couldn't figure out the fucking headphones. The drunk boys in the front were arguing now with the Trini woman. A young white woman with a briefcase, sitting beside the bag, seemed to have had her music disturbed by the yelling, and stepped in to shut up the boys.

I responded to Cole with images of a gas station and a lightbulb.

The blonde yelled, *"Madame, s'il te pait, descender ici, peut-on? Tu peux dire que c'etait pour prevenir la violence, que nous etait soud."*

"Are you threatening a bus driver?" said the driver.

The driver said something into a radio receiver.

The boy deflated.

"No," he said, leaning on the pole. "But you could say that you felt something was going to happen."

"Saviez vous qu'il y a une amende de cinq cent dollars pour l'intoxication publique?" said the driver, over the speakers.

Cole responded with, *really? I think you're actually gaslighting ME here. what I was trying to say before. it isn't fair that u use gaslighting to do this to me. I know you're having problems with the journal but it isn't fair to take it out on me*.

I returned my phone to airplane mode. I looked at the traffic ahead, and the space between the bus and the hearse. The police officer with the helmet nodded to the bus driver on

his walk to the side door. From inside, it seemed that we were watching the accident on the news, until the driver opened the door and the officer entered with the dented object. The officer smiled to the driver and turned to face the boys.

"*Ca va tu ici?*" said the officer.

"Do you know when this will all be handled?" said the woman with the briefcase.

"Not long," said the officer. "*Mais vous, les deux, ca va?"* the officer asked, again, to the boys.

"*Ca va*," said the darker-haired one.

"*Les gars.* I can smell the booze from here," said the officer.

"We aren't boys," mumbled the blonde.

"*C'est juste des garcons. Un peu de patience,"* said a white middle-aged man in a pea coat, seated behind the woman with the purple dreads.

"We're men," said the darker-haired boy.

"Act like it," I instructed.

The boys looked at me, as if for the first time. Quiet fell. The woman in the dreads, too, looked back to me. The officer turned to the driver and spoke in a friendlier tone. The blonde boy pulled an open bag of candy from his pocket, and offered it to the taller one.

"You need sugar," he said.

"I'm fine," said the darker-haired one, gagging.

“What she said,” said the officer, pointing to me. “You should listen. Are you going to be nicer to your patient driver, here, if I leave?”

“Yes, sir,” said the blonde one, sarcastically.

“Would you like to come with me?” said the officer.

“No, sir,” said the taller one.

“Can we leave the bus?” said the woman with purple dreads. “This is my nightmare.”

The officer seemed taken off guard by the comment.

“It won’t be long. Don’t hesitate to contact your driver if they start acting up,” he said.

“*Ne t’inquiètes pas,”* said the middle-aged man.

The officer nodded to the man, as though they’d together found an answer to something complex. He pointed to the boys. He left. He said something warmly to the driver from the sidewalk, with the helmet still in his hands and the door still open. The door shut. The boys looked to me as if I had snitched on them in high school. I wondered if they might be in high school, thinking how much passed since I had been in high school, high in school, high on anything real.

“What?” I said, returning the gaze.

The boys returned their stare to the hearse.

“Fucking cunt,” said the taller one. He took the bag of candy back from his friend, and emptied the thing in his mouth.

“I can hear you,” I said.

“Excuse me?” said the shorter boy, turning back.

“She told you to fuck yourself,” said the woman with the dreads.

Both boys turned back to the woman. I took my phone off airplane mode. Seventeen messages from Cole. The boys looked back to me, and then back to each other.

The sun was setting early on this winter day.

The blonde pushed the other. He seemed pleased.

“You idiot,” he murmured, “one of those candies was special.”

“Shut up,” said the black-haired boy, standing now without assistance of the pole. “*C’est tu ton chum*?” he said, to the driver.

“*Excusez*?” came over the speakers.

“You and the officer,” he continued. “You are dating?”

“Do you ever think to shut the fuck up? This isn’t your apartment,” said the woman with the briefcase; their yelling seemed to have again interrupted her music.

“*C’est un pays libre*,” said the blonde-haired boy, with a performed boldness, as if he did not believe himself. “And maybe you’re the guests.”

“You can’t expect them to be sensitive,” said the middle-aged man. “They were raised by phones.”

"*Et comment ça fait que c'est votre pays?*" said the woman in the dreadlocks. "I assume you speak Mohawk?"

"Were you serious about the candy?" said the black-haired boy to the blonde, as though he hadn't heard the woman.

"*Dix minutes,* they tell me it will be resolved in about ten minutes,*"* came over the speakers.

"You just took them without thinking," said the blonde.

"Does anyone have water?" said the black-haired boy, toward the driver.

The bus was quiet. A man who reminded me of my father was sitting quietly behind me, looking out the same window I had turned to.

"*De l'eau serait* unreal," he repeated.

"Only water," he repeated, pupils black.

"It's only ten minutes," said the Trini woman. The boy made as though he hadn't heard.

"Calm down," said the middle-aged white man, as though to his sons. "Only ten minutes."

"He's right," said the blonde. "We'll get water in ten minutes. Nine minutes." He nudged his friend's shoulder.

More texts. Cole seemed to be going through something he felt would justify an emotional rant. Some texts were hundreds of words long, insecurity dripping from the letters; but my hands felt dry, separate, unaffected.

“Does your bag need a seat?” I asked the teenaged boy with the backpack. He looked up to me as if having been caught stealing.

I sat.

“*On peut descendre: le bus est mort,* you can get off now,” said the bus driver.

Everyone got up. The black-haired boy started to cry with joy.

I got up. The doors opened. I left through the rear exit to the sidewalk. The black-haired boy was now weeping and dancing on the sidewalk. I held in my laugh until I was far enough ahead and it exploded from me as a pair of older white men were passing in suits. They stopped and yelled something, assuming I was laughing at them. I was laughing too hard to hear their exact words, my stomach hurt from the laughter and I worked to calm down so that the new and real pain would slow. The men continued on. An image of the boy dancing—shaking as if he were being electrocuted or attempting to remove a dust that would never leave—brought a new wave of laughter. I calmed when I found a bicycle hand-grip that had been forgotten on the curb.

There was a shaded circle on the road where a liquid had pooled. It seemed like blood, although it could have been engine fluid, and it was hard to get a full conception of the puddle’s shape because of all the cars that were now free to drive over it. Between vehicles, I noticed that portions of the puddle were lightening with the grip of the tires.

Cole called.

I walked for a while in the cool afternoon and entered the thrift store.

Inside, I passed a woman dealing with screaming twins by ignoring them the way a person might when stopping to take a friend seriously. The children dried their tears and said, ‘it’s not fair,’ and ‘that’s not nice!’ in the nagging voices of the loved. I walked upstairs to the place of board-games where Cole had brought me after first finding the place, when he had shown me a basket of old decks of cards as if having found the Holy Grail; the basket was gone. There were either no cards left, or they hadn’t sold and were removed. Under the aisle sign, “ART / ART,” I found a beautiful painting of an alligator. The alligator was outlined in sharp fine lines, its open mouth carved in black, with dark edges of white teeth forcing the bleached colours to pop. After rifling through a number of empty landscapes—old and new frames leaning against one another—I found a piece of a wolf. The central shape of the wolf’s large face was made jagged by contours that did not connect, which were all then pressed down with overlaid text, and yet there seemed to be an order to the disorder, or a refusal to be either ordered or disordered… despite these differences, the animals were beautiful beside one another. The contrast seemed to amplify each of their qualities… depending on which you had chosen to look at first. Alligator and wolf, beautiful together—or beside each other—for however long. You’d think that one might have eaten the other at first sight.

The frames, however, were flat gray plastic. I looked at other paintings I might buy for their frames—more empty landscapes; people miraculously absent, cleared out—but the best I could find was a brown plastic rectangle with a false oak veneer. A tall and beautiful man approached me, with hands in pockets. His nametag flapped GERANT, GERANT, GERANT. I explained the situation about the frames.

“There’s a place just down the street, by Rachel, where you could get them done,” he said, touching his reddish beard.

“Ah, but so expensive,” I said, wondering whether this man was flirting or working. He looked me up and down—at my new dress and shoes, it seemed—making no attempt to hide the sizing up.

“They’re very beautiful,” he said, looking now away from me to the paintings; both at once, it seemed, or in between. “These are the best frames you’re gonna find here.”

2

Cole

To make sense of what had happened in the Harvey's, I'll go back. Our town rested on a canal dug for a war that never arrived. My family sold chocolate in a shop on the boulevard of stone buildings that rested behind brass plaques—letters popped out to form words that said everything but the uncomfortable details that made the place unique. This evasion was then corrected by the Old English graffiti of a local artist.

BUILT IN 1832, THIS CANAL WAS DESIGNED TO PROTECT THE NEW COLONY FROM CONFLICT. 4,513 MEN DIED DURING THE DIFFICULT CONSTRUCTION—MANY OF WHOM WERE IMMIGRANTS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM.

the rest were slaves

My first home was in the East side of town, surrounded by forest that contained an abandoned zoo. We would cross the blackened ice of a cement pond carved deep in the forest for alligators, which we'd joke would swallow us when the ice cracked beneath our boots. In Spring, I spent time in the woods building alternate homes, high up in the pines that bent with my body. The field between the forest and our yard was a junkyard that had closed in the1950s: everything from dryers to shattered dressing mirrors were entombed in the weeds. We were careful to hop around the embedded objects, such as the rusted teeth of graters that opened from the dirt like half-opened mouths. Many of the objects were hidden to the eye, and you had to have tripped on them once before to know where they were, which we had done for a quite a time before setting

the maps in our minds. There were thousands of liquor bottles, thick as skulls, rolling below the surface of the long dry weeds.

As teenagers, we smoked in a pick-up truck with a wooden cab that sat near the border of the field and our lawn. A maple tree had grown up in the space of the hood and there were pistons and a crankshaft poking out from branches high in the trunk.

My mother, Jennifer, worked the yard in gray canvas work gloves that were covered in red rubber spots, and she wore old socks of incongruous patterns from vintages stores, owned by dead folks she'd never met. I'd often find the socks near the edge of the grass, where she'd rest to smoke.

"Progress," she said, one spring Saturday, returning to the kitchen as I ate lunch with my father. One of her favourite stories about her own father, who cleared the stalls for the horses, was that he'd call her 'kid number 1 or 4 or 6' because he couldn't remember the names of his daughters.

Now—her hands still in their gloves—she twisted the tap to pour a glass of water. I left the table to shut off the television in the living room. Two deer were at the window, looking in. I stuck out my tongue. The deer ran off and I returned to the kitchen. My father was washing our plates.

"You ate fast," I said.

"Your mother wants your help in the garden."

The creak of our porch door had her look up at me before returning to digging. She was chopping the hardened clay with the hand-spade. She had had to fire a manager at work that morning for stealing truffles.

"Yes?" I said.

“Can you pass me that bag?”

I picked up the bag and dropped it beside her.

“I asked you to pass it, not drop it.”

She spoke to me without looking away from the hole.

“The mint plant is probably dead now.”

“Where would you have liked it?” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“I didn’t see any mint. It was dirt.”

“It was a stupid thing to do.”

I stood on the stone walkway that split the gardens. She had built the walkways by breaking stones with a sledge-hammer and filling in the gaps with soil.

I wondered if she thought that staring at the clay would soften it.

“I found your smokes, Cole.”

“I don’t smoke Belmonts.”

“I didn’t even tell you what kind they were.”

“I wasn’t finished: I don’t smoke Belmonts, I don’t smoke Players, I don’t smoke.”

The V shape of the spade was thudding against a frozen layer of clay.

“Do you know how much work your father does?”

“I don’t see how that’s related.”

She was continuing with the spade, although the clay seemed to be as hard as stone.

“I won’t be here this weekend,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Driving to the Eastern Townships. Apparently one of your great, great, great grandmothers is buried there. She built a school, in this remote spot, and that’s why you do so well on your tests.”

“I’m going to see if Dad needs help with the laundry.”

A few hours later my friend Brian picked me up in his Jetta and we drifted on to the gravel road that spiraled up to the lookout over the village. The trees were regaining their bright green leaves and the houses that lead down to the beach were staggered like mixed shoes left on a staircase. I lit the blunt. I liked the feel of disappearing in the smoke. When we slipped out of the car, smoke billowed from our open doors as if the car was on fire. In the fresh air, I lost the sense of the cloak that the smoke had provided, but it was still nice to look over the town with a new filter. I looked over the town, below.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Brian asked.

“What?” I said.

“I asked you three times if you fucking wanted to leave!” said Brian.

“This weed is amazing,” I said.

Brian was more aggressive on the drive down the hill. The rear tire on my side of the car would threaten to slide into the ditch and I’d clutch the door handle, and then tires would catch earth with rubber teeth to rip us back on line. Brian noticed me clutching the door handle and laughed. I loosened my grip and punched him in the shoulder. We drove to the train bridge to watch our friend Carlos backflip from the train tracks into the river. There were four or five trucks in the dirt parking lot and twenty people smoking in pick-up beds that had been pulled flat, including Lily, a girl with eyes that caught you, who was rumoured to have recently dumped her partner. She was leaning on the truck, writing something in a notebook, seemingly

comfortable amidst all the white people surrounding her, many of whom would likely not have been, in her shoes.

There was a hill that lead up to the tracks, where you could walk along the bridge to see the river. I was caught by the faint voice of someone screaming from the water. Brian entered the circle to smoke with Lily. I turned from them to run up the embankment, which lead to the iron tracks. Luke was in the water, screaming, “Carlos is a bii-tch!” in a forced baritone. Carlos stood alone on the bridge, on the edge of a wooden tooth of the support, his body held like a pirate in his last minutes above water.

“Are you actually going to flip?” I said.

He seemed jarred by my presence, perhaps having thought himself alone. He stepped backwards toward the hundred-foot space between the bridge and water.

“What the fuck do you think?” he said.

The tracks started to hum. Carlos was looking behind me, as people were climbing onto the tracks, with Brian and Lily trailing. He cracked a can of beer and his feet left the wood.

To me, the backflip seemed to happen slower than the video of it later showed. He was below the bridge, knee to nose, the can leaving his hand, and then: he flipped again, unscripted, ending looking up to the sky when he landed flat on his back with a smack.

We rushed down the embankment by the bridge and I nearly fell over the edge and onto the old bricks that lined the canal. Luke was screaming in a now authentic tenor.

By the time I reached the water, Brian had paddled off in a canoe with Clay. I dove from the edge into the black river and cut the water in thrashes, alone, the style imperfect but functional. When I reached the boys, Luke was helping Carlos from sinking.

“Here,” Brian said, attempting to pull Carlos into the canoe that was leaning to take on water.

“Just pull me,” whispered Carlos.

“That was insane,” said Clay. “Are you al-right?”

“Fine,” whispered Carlos.

We drove and waited in the emergency room when nurses forbade us from following his stretcher. I thought for sure that it would be the last I’d see of him after hearing, “*un trou dans l’poumon gauche.”*

“It’s not a big deal,” he said, when they allowed us in.

“You punctured a lung,” I said.

“Cover for me while I go for some fresh air.” Carlos pressed fingers to lips as if smoking an invisible cigarette. He left the room with Brian and his I.V.

I got under the thin hospital blanket and checked my phone. There was a text from my mother. “Love u. Come home for dinner!”

A nurse entered the room, looked at me, stopped, squinted at me, and left.

When I returned home, dinner was ready. Everyone sat in their chairs, with the fourth empty.

“Where were you?” said my father.

“Carlos was in an accident,” I said.

“Is he okay?” said my mother, concerned.

My sister motioned me to sit, patting my seat. Her feet were swinging above the floor. It felt like a glass was about to fall.

“He’s fine,” I said.

“What did he do this time?” said my father.

“A backflip went wrong,” I said, “but he should be alright. Was making jokes.”

My mother went to the counter and picked up a cardboard box and slit it open with a paring knife. She removed a piece of pottery and brought it to the table with absolute care, as if holding a baby bird.

“Look what I found today!”

She held the dish beneath the light that hung above the table, so that we could see. There was lettering on the inside core of the saucer—the tail of which ended where it began—and she turned the dish as she read out the cursive lettering.

Saturday night, I pulled up to Lily's home in the suburbs, stopping first at the house opposite by mistake. The houses were so similar that enormous mirrors may well have been lining the perimeter of every lawn.

Her father was waiting in the driveway, beside a van. He was holding a hammer. He approached me. I opened my door to talk.

"Cole," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said. "Is Lily here?"

"Did you ever play on the Panthers? Goalie, right?"

"No," I said.

"You looking to get out?" he said, pointing to the open door.

"The window's broken," I said. "I'm about to get it fixed."

"Dad!" yelled Lily, rushing down the front steps. "What are you doing?"

"This boy was explaining his car troubles."

"A hammer?" said Lily.

"Taking a look at the van," he said, retreating from my door.

"Okay bye," said Lily.

"Back by nine," he said.

"Mom said we could be home by eleven," said Lily, closing her door.

"Bring milk."

Lily sighed. She turned to me.

"He's just a nervous guy," she said.

“He seems nice,” I said. “How are you?”

“Are you stoned?” she said.

“Why?” I said.

“It smells like you just smoked,” she said.

“I was nervous,” I said. She laughed.

“Where is it?” she said, pulling out a lighter.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I said.

“You know,” she said, looking through the windshield at the road that split a forest of pines. “Our van is new. We got it, like, last week.”

“Here,” I said, passing the pipe from my jacket pocket.

We pulled into the long C bend of town before the train bridge underpass, our unofficial border for the start of the town, as we passed the official border and sign, MERRICKVILLE: ~~JEWEL~~ OF THE RIDEAU.

ghost

“Don’t your parents own the chocolate store?” she said. We cleared the underpass and neared the commercial strip of stone buildings, stopping at the corner of the barracks on the canal. There was a sign on the barracks lawn that detailed the story of our founder drowning his competitor, which some student workers had had printed in place of the desired project.

“Yep,” I said.

“Oh my god! Let’s go!” said Lily.

“I’m always there. How about we roll a joint on the hill? We could go after,” I said. My hands were sweating on the wheel. We turned and passed some haunted buildings.

“I’m blazed already! You literally own a chocolate store and are refusing to go.”

I pulled up in front of the store.

“We have to be quick, or they’ll make me work,” I said.

“Dope!” she said, leaping from the car and into the store.

I turned off the van, and waited for a few cars to pass. I opened the door, noticed who was behind the counter through the glass storefront, and stopped. I returned my sights to the streets. Brian was walking toward me with a puppy.

“Buddy!” he said, approaching.

“Who’s this?” I said, kneeling so that the puppy could hold my knuckles between its teeth. The small bits of bone scraped my skin like little knives.

“*Whiskey*,” he said.

“*Terrible*,” I said. “Why not Charles? He looks like a Charlie.”

“He pisses fucking everywhere,” said Brian. “My sister got him. You working?”

“Just came by to check it out,” I said.

“What?”

“A friend wanted to check it out, the store,” I said.

“Your eyes are so red,” he said.

“So are yours.”

“So who’s the friend?”

Lily opened the door to the store and said, “What’s taking you?” before seeing the puppy and saying “ohhhh!” The door was left open, showing my mother. I approached the door and made to close it.

“You weren’t going to introduce us?” said my mother, from behind the counter.

“Oh, didn’t want to take much time.”

“She’s beautiful!” she said.

“I have to go.”

When I returned, Brian and Lily were kneeling with the puppy.

“Good to go?” I said.

“Yep!” said Lily.

“Where to?” said Brian.

“For a drive,” I said.

“I’ll come,” said Brian.

“No dogs allowed,” I said.

“Nice to see you!” said Lily.

We drove up to the lookout when the sky was spilling a navy blue that fell into purple, then into orange and then a thick red of the dying sun. The colours seemed like layers of a sandwich, separate ingredients of the same meal, or waves, separate movements of the same thing. Lily broke up some weed with an Oxford Mathematics kit and the tin reflected the waning sunlight onto her breasts and neck. I rolled down the windows, and hung my arm on the door.

“This sky,” I said.

“You came up to talk about the sky, hey,” she said.

“What did you want to talk about?”

There was some rustling at the base of trees nearby, before three deer emerged. They noticed us and walked up the slope as if we weren’t there.

“I’m hungry,” said Lily.

“And we haven’t even smoked yet,” I said.

“Venison,” said Lily.

"Come on."

"Oh Cole." Lily placed her hand at the nape of my neck, fingertips running along the smaller hairs. Goosebumps pricked along my spine to my shoulders. "Couldn't kill a mouse. You're cute."

"Cute?" I said, recoiling from her fingers. "Puppies are cute. I'm sexy."

"And what about me?" said Lily, looking from the kit to my eyes.

"I'd date you," I said, gripping the door handle from the outside.

I was walking in a field with my father and sister when I noticed the bear.

"Stay calm," said my father. "Keep walking at this pace. You'll be fine."

I tried to stay walking. It felt close—I started to run. When I looked back, the bear was tackling something in the space where my sister had been. I looked closer while still running: the bear was pulling out the intestines of a wolf.

I woke from the nightmare to a room soaked in twilight, floorboards darkened from powder to navy blue. I descended the stairs to the kitchen. They creaked out the aches that two centuries of feet had padded around the house. I turned on the kitchen tap. I drank the water and set the glass down on the counter where it made a strange sound. I looked down and noticed that it had landed on a thin leg. A mouse's body lay stretched from a wooden trap, and there was a line above the eyes where metal had snapped through.

That morning, our student body went on strike after a teacher broke down, telling the students to fuck themselves when they asked for a warning the next time he used rape to make a point. There were five hundred of us in the parking lot when a small camera crew showed. Carlos did a backflip from a fire hydrant while a group chanted FLIPS FOR OUR FUTURE!

"It's possible it doesn't air," said the anchor, to Eric, our student council president, after a few interviews. "But you never know!"

Screams burst from the crowd when a notice from the principal about cancelled classes rang around the lot. The crew filmed a last clip and drove off in their van.

"Amazing, right?" I said to Lily, who broke from a group of friends. Her blue and green plaid uniform skirt was rolled high.

"I actually wish I could've done my presentation today," she said, lighting a cigarette. "I practiced for a fucking long time!"

"Ah," I said. "That's shitty."

"Everything seems to be happening over and over here, I can't wait to move," she said.

"Where'd you apply?" I said.

"Carleton," she said.

"Just Carleton?" I said.

"Their English program seems amazing," she said, "plus their rez' are on the water. You?"

"Same," I said.

"Really?" she said, now holding her sight on me.

"So far. I might apply to Ottawa U."

“Hmm,” she said. “Probably both good. Something new needs to happen, I’m done with all this fucking practice.”

“I agree,” I said.

“What do you mean by that?” she said.

There was a loud and repeated honk, as if on beat, which accompanied a familiar car that pulled up beside us. The passenger door was flung open from the inside.

“Get in,” said my mother.

“Sorry,” I said to Lily.

She nodded.

I nodded back and got in the car. We sped through the roundabout in front of the school.

“Slow down!”

The car stopped and the smell of burned rubber sept in through the vents.

“Do you know how much trouble you’re in?”

“For?”

“You’re on the radio!”

“And?” I said, trying to remember what I said.

We passed a car on the inside of the round-about at the edge of the town.

“Can you slow down?”

She looked at me as we slammed into straightened belts, bruising chests. She hit the gas, and the brake again, and we hit the seats. Then, she pressed the gas. Then, the brake. Gas, brake. A car behind honked. She sped up to one-nineteen.

“Please pull over.”

We were facing the C-bend near the bridge where Ian McGuinty had died on his motorcycle by sliding into the wall of a gas station.

“I could drive you into the fucking woods, you know that?”

The trees on the sides of the road were flush with new leaves, and there were turtles in the marsh. We were approaching the rear of a car that was going the speed limit.

A few minutes later, we skid into our lane. She yelled and opened her door. She got out and marched in front of the car. I was sitting. I was holding the plastic doorhandle. I hadn’t pressed down the lock. Although the radio was off, the drums of Arcade Fire’s opening to “Neon Bible” came to mind, filling the space of the car around me. I focused on the beat and looked through the windshield at a space between our barn and our neighbour’s property. This dividing line was a ditch of blackberries and thorns where I had never walked. I wondered if the berries would stain my teeth, if the thorns were as sharp as they looked.

The door tore open and she reached over me to unbuckle my seatbelt. She said something but I was listening to the drums. She missed the red plastic PUSH button a few times before it sunk down. I kept my sights on the ditch as I was dragged out of the car.

I boxed Josh Brodie at the fair, Jesse Rowles in a tannery; broke my thumb on Chris Mansionni’s shoulder; Phil Res snapped my nose in a driveway and I knocked out Ryan Holme in a hallway; split a knuckle against Mike Draper’s skull in a stairwell; got carried out of Miller Bar for throwing Morgan Elliot through a swinging bathroom door; pulled from O’Heaphy’s for

slamming Tyler Kitley's face against the bar; tapped out thirty-four seconds into a fight with Drew Lamaison after losing sight in one eye, and tried to fight Jamie Roam a few times for something of significance but he was a pacifist who dodged well and my new leather jacket was too tight, and I never connected.

My parents had divorced, and my sister and I moved with my father to a newer home on the other side of town, which bordered the canal. The walls were bare; my father having left everything behind. Sometimes, we found price tags on the dishes and laughed, and my father promised to buy new scrub brushes for the sink.

One April morning, my father announced a trip to visit his family in the hills of the province.

"There's chicken in the freezer I picked up at M&M," he said, keys jingling in hand. "What a great store—$9.99 for six. If I ever had to invest in a store, it'd be M&M. You should be good, right?"

"That's great, thanks."

"Spaghetti's in the cupboard. I left a note with instructions on the box. Salt. Don't forget the salt. Salt, and the chicken in the freezer. This M&M spot, they're doing it right."

"Thanks."

"If only you could see yourself right now. The smirk!"

"I'm not smirking!"

"Just make sure I'm not getting any calls from the neighbours when I get back."

"I'm not a smirker!"

"You don't think I can call a smirker when I see one?"

That Friday, Brian and I collaborated with Carlos and Luke to fill a suitcase with drugs. Jack, the saddest of us, started a push-up contest. Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* was placed in the five-CD changer. I left the boys in the living room, where they'd turned the maple dinner table into an assembly line of scissors and shreds of cardboard, for some air. I left to the porch, and looked toward the forest that bordered our property. I leaned on the glass door. It slid. The hand that poked through the space of the open door was holding a pipe.

"Come on out then," I said.

Brian hopped out and we wrestled.

"Lily's coming," I said. Brian lit the blunt.

"Are you gonna fuck her finally?" said Brian.

"Maybe we already have," I said.

"Do it in your dad's bed," said Brian.

"*Thank you for giving me the house, I just came on your sheets*," I said.

"Dick wouldn't give a fuck! It'd probably start up a conversation about the difference in mattress stiffness between like a single and a King."

"And a Queen."

We smoked. A white wolf broke the clearing of the trees. It seemed like the wolf I'd often seen in the woods about a kilometre in, near where Brian and I had almost been shot by a hunter as kids. The animal seemed to be carrying a stick.

"It's a leg!" shrieked Brian.

I realized it was our new neighbour's husky, Rock. There were streaks of blood on his white face that blended gray around the eyes. The dog approached us and dropped a severed femur. The dog was sitting with a bloodied smile, looking at us. I considered if smiling was its

attempt to breathe—because dogs don't sweat—or if it was because he was proud, wanted validation for the kill.

"Ho-ly!" said Brian.

He reached down to pick up the leg. I caught his shoulder.

"Don't."

"Buddy, I've known Rock since he was a little shit."

Brian crouched down while looking the dog in its blue eyes. The husky's mouth closed as Brian picked up the leg. He threw the limb back toward the forest. The dog leapt off to retrieve it. They continued this rhythm for a while—they seemed to have the form down well enough that it was hard to tell how many times they had done it, because you felt that you were seeing a memory, or a replay, of something that already happened. I went inside for water.

Forty of us were inside the house a few hours later and a cloud of smoke was forming in the living room. The smoke hung above my father's framed *Seinfeld* print, with characters Elaine, George, Jerry, and Kramer looking down over us. Arcade Fire's "Neon Bible" was playing on the stereo.

Brian was sipping on a purple drink from a blue cup with his arm around Anjelica, who was talking with Lily, with whom I was sharing beers. I left to get more in the kitchen, and found Carlos. He told me the story of the severed leg.

"I was there," I said.

"It's downstairs," said Carlos.

"The leg?" I said.

“How fucked up are you?” said Carlos. “The dog. And why didn’t you tell me that in the first place? I wasted all this time telling you a story when I could’ve been down in the Jamaican shower.”

Carlos leapt downstairs. I walked to the top of the staircase that lead to the basement and considered whether to follow him or to return to Lily. That thought was interrupted by the slamming of car doors outside. I looked through the double-thick window that framed the front door. Aliya Grae was sitting in her burgundy Dodge Dart with Jack. My mother was opening and slamming Aliya’s door. A car in the tail of the lane backed out in a C formation and pulled away into the town. The album had skipped to the final song.

I heard drums, a beer in each hand, and should likely have been getting the dog in the basement. She finished with the car and came up the front steps. I hadn’t locked the door—the door handle dented my father’s drywall when she pushed it open.

“What do you fucking think you’re doing?” she said.

I wondered how many had noticed us, but the music was loud; stuck repeating the album’s last track.

I said, “You need to leave.”

She pushed me into the post that cornered the staircases. Beer splashed over my black hoodie. The bottles fell and the rest of the liquid spread across the floor when her right fist connected with my eye, a lazy hook that I should have seen coming. She came with some other slaps and I caught her; the song was about to end again, start again, end again. I lost my grip and she slapped me toward the living room of people who were standing like mannequins.

Then the dog emerged from downstairs and bit her shin. I took the opportunity to catch her wrists and back her against the wall, over the dent. The dog stopped, still covered in blood from the forest. I pulled her toward the door.

“Go,” I said, between her shouts.

I loosened my hands. She screamed something and slammed the door. Then, she opened the door, from the outside, and slammed it again, before tripping down the four front steps to roll into the place where the hood of Aliya’s car had rested. She got up and yelled something at our door. The sound was muffled by the layers of glass.

Monday, my father returned, in a chipper mood from having seen his family. The house was spotless. Although it was not my first black eye, he sat down at the table as I ate. He did not seem to have noticed the different shade of paint above the space of the dent.

“You don’t eat spaghetti now?”

“I don’t want spaghetti anymore.”

“Leave for two days, he doesn’t want spaghetti anymore.”

“I want to start cooking. How was your trip?”

“Great, they all say hi. What did you get up to?”

“Lily came over.”

I finished eating and went into the living room. I used the satellite remote to click on *Seinfeld.* A baseball game appeared. A loud knock sounded on the glass of the front door. My father went to answer and stopped me by raising his hand to me with an open palm. He opened the door. I recognized the key of our neighbour’s voice, although it was now sharper than usual, as if to alert us that our lawn was on fire. They worked at our mother’s store—my father had sold his portion—and had a reputation for excellent customer service. I got up from the couch and

leaned on the wall between the living room and the staircase. I could see the open door, but not the man.

"She's going to file a report with the cops."

"Have a good night."

"You're hurting her."

His fingers splayed like starfish on the door so that it could not be pushed shut.

"Her story lines up, Richard. Might mean nothing to you, but don't you forget that it means a whole lot to everyone in this community who cares about her. We see what's happening here. Your son will go to jail; do you want that? You should see her wrists, Richard. You should see her goddamn wrists and then tell me to have a good night like that."

There was a commotion at the door—the man said, 'hello,' off guard, someone having broken his monologue. The person didn't return the greeting.

"Lily," said my father, smiling.

"Mr. Lachance," said Lily's voice. "May I come in?"

"Oh, of course," said my father, gesturing with a large wave of the arm, as if for royalty.

Lily entered the room, saw me, seemed taken off guard—either that I was so close to the door, or some expression I might have had—and stopped.

"Wanna go for a drive? I got the van for the night," said Lily. "The new one."

I nodded—Lily took my hand. She walked between my father and the man, who seemed to be waiting for our leave before continuing.

"Have a good night," said Lily, to my father.

"Bring him back in one piece," said my father.

"We'll see," said Lily.

I didn't say anything to my father as I followed her out of the house, down the few steps to the driveway. Lily stopped, held my hand, and turned, toward the men, who seemed set to resume.

"Alan," she said. "Your wife called the store this morning, with some questions about a receipt she found," said Lily, emphasizing *receipt.* "I told her I wasn't sure but would ask you, if I saw you. Was it for the lace—"

"I'll come by tomorrow," said the man, the blood leaving his face. "Do you work tomorrow? What time should I come by?"

"Have a good night," she said, and we walked to her van, and drove off.

4

Swimming

Cole noticed the person in the black hoodie across the street, but was too consumed by his thoughts about the breakup to think anything of it. At St. Hubert and Mont Royal, he saw Lily, by chance, exit a café—in his new neighbourhood. She was with another woman, and they split, hugging. He stopped walking. Her yellow chiffon dress seemed to burst from the gray sidewalk as when colour arrived to black and white film. Cole stood still. People passed him. She was not supposed to be here, he thought. He considered changing his direction, and glanced down Mont Royal to the East. The stoplight flicked to yellow. He turned back and noticed that Lily was approaching the opposite curb. Her chin was raised. He considered that her chin-raising was only possible because she was without him… he noticed the figure in the hoodie, stopped on the parallel corner. The pedestrian signal lit up with dots that formed the silhouette of a white stick man, leaning to move forward.

Lily had noticed Cole, too, and was tangled in his gaze; she pulled out a cigarette, turned West, looking up to St. Denis, before remembering the last time they had smoked together, and how they spoke of their exes. He had said, “I treat them like the dead.” This afternoon, her hair was held up, exposing a tattoo on the nape of her neck. She turned from St. Denis to St. Hubert. She saw him watching her. Cole was crossing the street and looking away when she stopped in front of him so that he ran into her. He said “sorry,” before realizing who it was. A car was revving its engine. He placed a bruised hand on his waist, pressed his lips together, and raised his eyebrows. Cars honked. Cole ran with Lily to the eastern curb. The figure in the hoodie returned to the north-east corner.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” said Lily, tilting her head to the side.

“Funny,” said Cole.

“Still am,” said Lily.

“What are you doing here?”

“Here?”

“In my neighbourhood,” said Cole.

“I wasn’t aware you’d picked up the boulevard.”

Cole turned to notice that the man in the hoodie was standing sheepishly across the street.

“You didn’t think we’d run into each other here?” Cole asked her.

“Move then, follow the artists to Mile X with me. Wear jeans. You don’t own this neighbourhood.”

“I retract the funny comment,” said Cole.

“I’m in a rush,” said Lily, turning away from him.

“We never discussed the texts,” said Cole.

“Let’s talk soon? It was nice to see you,” she told him.

Cole stood on the corner for a minute. He watched traffic pass. He walked south, away from his date on St. Denis and St. Laurent, and sat on a bench. He looked at the three-story buildings of St. Hubert—bricks stained with years of rain—and then up, to the fluffy cumulus clouds, islands in a blue sea. He pictured the clouds colliding to churn gray nimbostratus. He wished that it would finally rain. He looked back down at the street and noticed the man sitting on a bench, facing him, and then down at a green leaf that was on the verge of being swallowed by a sewer grate. An elderly couple passed with cups of ice cream and tiny red plastic spoons. Cole pictured the man choking on an unseen chip of ice. Sparrows, above, condensed in pairs, grouped, and dispersed, above and between hydro wires. He considered what it might look like

for a bird to have a heart attack. He bet that it must have happened on this street, that a bird had had one and had fallen to cause an accident. A brown pigeon landed at his feet. It left with a gray french-fry that clung to a chunk of blackened cheese.

Cole received a text and walked south on St. Hubert to a bar sunk behind a line of trees painted with red Xs. Inside, he found the bar cold. A sense of comfort arrived with the feeling that he knew the place when recognizing the bartender, and the pool table, knowing which leg had weakened the most from years of leaning bodies. Isabelle was seated at a table by the only window. They wore a black blouse pierced by purple wings and white anchors. Their martini glass was empty.

Cole and Isabelle ordered, then drank, a few double Old Fashioneds.

“So you throw the woman into molasses, wait for her friends to scrape the stuff off her body with squeegees, and when her skin’s still sticky, you text her ‘forgot my plants can I stop by’—at two a.m.—and then ‘guess not lol’—at four a.m.—and then ‘ah sorry for the texts I was high haha’—at ten a.m,” said Isabelle. “And you’re wondering why she hasn’t responded?”

“They’re fiddle-leafed figs! And they’re all I really want back. Also I didn’t throw her into molasses—I’m sticky too—but I get your point,” said Cole.

“Get me a drink if they pass,” said Isabelle, getting up from the table.

“I said drunk, not high,” said Cole.

“So alcohol allows you to morph into other people?” said Isabelle, still standing.

“Nobody’s the same when drunk. You aren’t right now,” said Cole.

“I’m not drunk. And not being the same is different than being somebody else,” said Isabelle.

“I’d never send that shit sober,” said Cole, looking down at the scratched table.

“That doesn’t change whether or not it happened,” said Isabelle. Isabelle looked at Cole as if starting to understand who he was behind the performances.

“The molasses bit? It sounded written,” said Cole, looking back up, to Isabelle.

“It’ll take time. Delete her, for some time. Erase her number,” said Isabelle.

“Know it by heart. Her number,” said Cole.

Isabelle chuckled.

“Get me a drink if they pass,” said Isabelle. They walked to the washroom. Cole stumbled to the bar and noticed the man in the hoodie at the other end. He bought two shots of tequila and two Sidecars, and brought them back to his sticky table.

Isabelle returned.

“Who’s this for?” Isabelle demanded.

“Compensate you for your sage advice,” said Cole, half done his drink.

“Things will get better. You remember me after Sana?”

“Thanks,” said Cole.

“I hope you’re relying on more than sarcasm to get through this.”

Cole noticed the man in the hoodie sitting at a table on the opposite wall.

“Sometimes I’m so glad not to be a dude,” said Isabelle. “Y’all keep the shit inside. End up killing people, no offense.”

“Don’t forget about ourselves,” said Cole.

Isabelle shook their head. They shot back the tequila.

“Yeah, after killing the rest of the folks who were just going about their days. It wouldn’t hurt you to talk about it,” said Isabelle.

“I’ll be fine,” said Cole, noticing the man across the room. “I can take care of it.”

"You're such a Cancer," said Isabelle.

"What?"

"You're right, I'm getting pretty wasted," said Isabelle. "Better for another time."

"Izzy."

"What?"

"You can't do that."

"Just did!"

"Come on."

"Be careful what you wish for."

"Come on."

"Fine: I know you—your stuff—gets mixed up in it—my dad left, and hmm, I don't have this reaction, these reactions. You need something—boxing. Sometimes thinking is the problem," she said, hand now on top of Cole's.

"You think I've been sitting around thinking?" said Cole, warmed by the touch.

"Come on," said Isabelle.

"Drunk, but I'm still myself. You can't tell me who I am and then tell me to shut up. That's a speech, not a conversation. Maybe you don't want to have a conversation," said Cole.

"Maybe she didn't. Maybe she didn't have to want to. Cole: we're drunk. I'm drunk," said Isabelle. "I'm drunk! But if you want to walk around so that you're seen, smoking all dramatically and looking at buildings, go ahead. Is what I'm saying is it isn't good for you, is what I'm saying. What I'm saying is, it isn't real and the world is not *genre une series* of black clouds," said Isabelle.

“Don’t tell me it’s sunny when I’m standing in the rain,” said Cole. He moved his hand from theirs. He grabbed his jacket. He noticed the man in the hoodie doing the same.

“Jesus Christ,” said Isabelle, settling with the bartender before following Cole out.

The cool August wind was pulling up the corners of park blankets, giving glimpses of pressed grass to Cole as he passed on his bike. He continued down the cement path that wound around a pond in the centre of the park, on his way to the public pool. After locking his bike, he changed in the empty locker room and entered the deck to find his friend keeping guard over a child running laps around the L-shaped pool. The child—a small girl with white-blonde hair—was stopping between laps to return a ball to a gray-haired man. The man would then throw back the ball as with a dog. When the girl tired of fetching the ball, and made for another lap of the pool, the man rested in his open floral shirt and sipped Pepsi from a glass bottle. The glass of the bottle was like those the man had drunk when he was the child’s age, although the shape had slimmed since. Barks came from the other side of the fence—behind the old man—after a squirrel descended from a tree to hang just out of reach. Seagulls that were prancing around the perimeter of the pool seemed unphased by the noises, perhaps aware of the presence and power of the fence.

Cole launched himself like an old spear into the water; warped but functional. When he surfaced, the hurried way that his arms cut the water made slapping sounds and showed more determination than grace. He did a few laps in this way and swam up to the lifeguard chair. The lifeguard was leaning back, wearing sunglasses.

“Jack,” said Cole, looking up, noticing that Jack’s pink flip-flop threatened to slip from his foot.

“Brother,” said Jack, looking down through his sunglasses with a smile, elbows resting on bare knees.

“You’re wearing sunglasses in the shade.”

Cole’s elbows rested on the grainy cement of the pool’s edge.

“It is better to be presumed a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt,” said Jack, opening his hands to exaggerate the words.

“Who said that?” said Cole.

“Lincoln,” said Jack. “I’m dying.”

“Why? What happened last night?”

“This morning. I don’t even know how I’m here,” said Jack, leaning back in the plastic chair. “These French girls from *Escalier*, rum on their roof.”

“You have a hard life,” said Cole.

The little girl passed by, making another lap, the cartoon ducks of her purple swimsuit bouncing with her skip.

“Easy to say from down there—you’re so far away. But you’ve developed quite the Simone Manuel finesse.”

Cole looked to the space of the fence between the pool and the dog park. The barking had stopped because the squirrel had slid from its branch. The old man had started feeding a seagull chips.

“Manuel is incredible,” said Cole.

“What happened?” said Jack, removing his sunglasses.

Cole looked back from the fence to Jack.

“The dogs stopped barking,” said Cole.

“No—you. You look like a fucking mess.”

“Says the man in sunglasses, sitting in the shade.”

“No man has a good enough memory to be a successful liar,” said Jack.

Cole laughed. He submerged and then pushed his body from the wall with his legs. After a few particularly rushed laps, he took a break on a ladder, keeping his body underwater except from the nose up. A gust chilled his ears—goosebumps pricked from ear to shoulder. He watched as the girl ran after the red-spotted ball, again. Jack seemed to be watching the man and the birds—more had joined—his sunglasses were aimed at that space. The girl was running away from the man and was nearly at the ball when a strong wind arrived. It pushed the ball enough so that her hand slipped as it contacted the hollow plastic ball. She fell to the cement. Skin ripped from her shoulder as from a piece of sandpaper. She screamed at a pitch that sent the seagulls flying. Although the girl had fallen close enough to the old man—his throws had grown lazy—Cole got out of the pool. Jack was sprinting to her from the other side and the man reached her first.

The man pulled her from the ground by her wrist and, within earshot of Cole, hissed:

“You’re embarrassing us.”

Jack was almost at the girl when she was struck with a quick but heavy slap.

Cole stopped. Jack argued with the man. The man left with the girl, making sure to stop and pick up his bottle. Cole shook his head at Jack and leapt in the water.

Under, he let out his breath. Cole sank. Bubbles trickled up to the surface. He watched the bubbles go, blurry with the chlorine. The weight of his bones had brought him to the bottom

of the pool. It felt soft when he touched the bottom. The blue space was empty around him. Drums started. He tried to think about the beauty of the empty space around him but the drums seemed to get louder, as with the acoustics of a hollow room. Cole swallowed water.

On his rise to the surface, he saw the water explode with bubbles as the body of another man plunged.

Outside, he coughed out water over the pool's edge.

"You alright?" yelled Jackie, from the chair.

"Simone Manuel," said Cole, between coughs.

"That fucking guy, with the little girl?" said Jack. "Anti-vaxxer. Wouldn't take our band-aids!"

"So they do exist," said Cole.

"I know," said Jack.

Cole dried himself with his towel and looked back to the empty pool.

The grocery store was artificially cool. Cole shivered with his wet hair. At the cash, the teller asked what he would do when winter fell.

"Order in," he said.

On the walk to his apartment, Cole considered whether he should find a partner before people locked themselves in jackets and apartments. He took a deep breath in, and out, as taught, and felt the warmth of the late summer. He changed course from his apartment to a bench that overlooked the park's artificial pond. The sky had bled from orange to purple and he ate a

banana as the spotlights of the pond's fountain were turned on, giving the illusion that the black pond was blue. He twisted the neck of one of the better bottles of wine and poured the blood-dark liquid into his mouth. He felt somewhere else, unsure if he should relax or prepare to work. It was a feeling he often had on waking, revisiting the imagined scenes of his sleep to determine if they were dreams, or nightmares, or a blur of both, or neither. He focused on the artificial lights. He thought about Lily. He noticed the man in the hoodie sitting at a bench on the other side of the fountain. Lily walked past. She noticed Cole and stopped.

"Hi," she said.

Cole was taken from his focus on the lights.

"Oh," he said, wiping his chin. "This is your park now, too?"

"How do you mean?"

"Of course you walk by the one time I'm drinking on a bench," said Cole. He looked away from her and back to the lights. "Drinking alone on a bench."

Lily sat.

"The lights are pretty," she said.

"They are."

"How have you been?" said Lily.

"Alright, okay. You?" said Cole.

"You're supposed to say *great, never been better,"* said Lily.

"This how you tell me you've been great?" said Cole.

"Yes," said Lily.

"I was wrong with the messages, I'm committed to changing," said Cole. *"*I was drunk*,* it's not who I am."

“If you think it was about texts, you weren’t listening,” said Lily.

“That’s what I heard,” said Cole.

“You don’t fucking listen to me,” said Lily.

“I could listen if it were said more clear,” said Cole. “If it was said more clearly. In a language I could understand.”

“I am not and was not here to keep you together,” said Lily.

“I never asked you to,” said Cole. “You do that with people because you enjoy it. Look at your friends. And the people you respect? They’re experts at what you do.”

“This is when I leave,” said Lily.

“Leave then,” said Cole.

Lily left.

Cole drank the bottle as lights changed to pink, yellow, and, after some time, to purple. He dropped the empty bottle into a garbage can. The bottle clanked among others in the filling can. He walked back through the park to his apartment. Groups of people were sitting and lying on the grass in semi-circles with guitars or partners, their faces lit up by the odd, igniting ember or fluorescent phone screen. In a group near the periphery of the park, he overheard someone playing a Fastball song that he liked. He stopped to sing with them. Cole was loud, and the people were struck by his enthusiasm—some laughed, others did not. Whatever the reaction, it provoked all the group to singing with him.

Cole laughed with them as the song closed, drinking an offered beer with a beautiful woman and her friend as they compared their worst interview stories. One of the women recalled a time when her briefcase fell from a desk in the middle of an interview, revealing it to be full of Oreos. When he told a story about being high in an interview and barking, the woman touched

his forearm. He smiled back at her, then thought of Lily. He made an excuse to leave, and walked off, approaching the row of trees that bordered the park and the four lanes of traffic, feeling as if he had passed a milestone.

And now, waiting beneath the orange dots that formed a hand, Cole hears drums. He leans against a lamppost. The beat comes louder. The street is bare, void of any useful distractions. Cole is losing his breath. Two men holding hands emerge from the park and pass him, jay-walking home. A few seconds later the electric white man of the Walk sign returns. The drums grow louder—Cole is losing his breath.

After eating, Cole drinks water. He practices knots with a rope on the table, fails. Mice are scratching on the wall behind a baseboard heater. He looks down through his window into a courtyard, and sees the man with the hoodie throwing a chain up and over a short lamppost. Cole walks to his living room and retrieves a length of chain from one of the unopened moving boxes. He retrieves a padlock from his gym bag, and carries both to the bathroom.

A knock at the door—a knock at the door at midnight.

He cracks opened the door, leaves the chain-lock.

“Hi there,” says Isabelle, playful, drunk.

“Oh hi,” says Cole.

“You look awful.”

“This is my Isabelle-may-be-stopping-by outfit,” says Cole, through the gap.

“What does that say about me?”

“You have good taste.”

“Are you busy?” asks Isabelle.

“Am I busy?”

"Yes."

"No, no," he says.

He shuts the door, removes the chain, and opens the door.

"I was in the neighbourhood," they say. "It really is a nice neighbourhood."

"It's quite white."

"You don't think I can tell?" says Isabelle.

"Well," says Cole, "you should see it when things are not dying."

"Leaves," Isabelle says, "they come back. This carpet—what a stain." Isabelle points to a black spot on Cole's blue carpet.

"I spilled espresso this summer. Such a pure thing to waste," he laments.

Isabelle turns from the carpet.

"Water's pure," they say.

Cole sets the stove-top press over the element with a gap in its centre. Cole and Isabelle drink cold water and wait for boiling water to rise through the crushed espresso. Isabelle mentions an early-morning departure from a woman's studio in Mile End. They motion to blue paint on their wrist.

"A painter. Interested in *themes of embodiment."*

Cole laughs, trails a finger along the rake of colour.

"Her fingernails," laughs Isabelle, glowing. And then a, "How are you?" making sure to hold his eye contact.

"Fine! I went swimming today."

The espresso overflows from the press and fizzles into clouds on the hot element. Cole is taken from a thought by the accident and spills water on Isabelle. Cole apologizes as he pulls the press from the orange element. He passes Isabelle a dry blue tea towel.

“Can I make it up to you with a drink?” he says, revealing a bottle of wine.

“Don’t worry about it,” Isabelle responds, drying off her shirt with the towel. Cole splits the bottle into two pint glasses.

“What’s the rope for?” asks Isabelle, wrapping the rope around Cole’s wrists.

“Plants,” he answers.

“Seriously?”

“Sailing,” says Cole.

“Here.” Isabelle removes the rope, slack, then guiding Cole’s hands over the material—their hand firm over his as one end is wrapped around, and then through the space of the tense line, which loosens as the knot is set. “This is a Blood Knot.”

5

Lily

"You can tell it's a male by the gray alula feathers," said Cole, about the heron in an insurance ad on the metro car. We were travelling on the Orange Line toward the Port, and the car was filled with tourists, taking photos of one another in the car—because they were tourists, although locals were taking photos, too, on account of the new screens in the walls. I had found the bird beautiful because it was shaking off water in the ad, something that I had noticed dogs did in the event of an uncomfortable or confusing encounter, to forget. Poison sumac bushes were digitally imposed in the swamp scene, and I wondered if the company had done so on purpose—to instil the sense of danger that the plant represented, to the few who could discern, considering the deaths it had caused—or if it had been the slip of an agency without a sense of history. "They can see in the dark, you know," said Cole, still looking at the screen, although the commercial had shifted to a piece about one of the city's heavily policed black neighbourhoods.

"I did," I said.

"They have these elaborate mating rituals, too," said Cole.

"Oh?"

"I saw one that involves twigs: they take a twig in their beak, and shake it around, like a prop," he said, shaking his head for emphasis, all while looking at me; perhaps for a reaction.

"I heard they don't mate for life," I said, "unlike wolves."

There was some commotion when we arrived at the Port. The windshield of a blue Porsche GT3 lay crushed by a stop sign, the root of the pole having loosened from crumbling cement.

"That's your favourite, isn't it?" I asked Cole, who was excited.

"It was," he said, shifting to a look of disinterest that I didn't believe.

"Oh, you can change?" I said, poking him in the ribs, and finding new muscle.

"I change, things change," he said, still looking at the car, making a point not to smile, it seemed, as his ribs were his most ticklish area.

I wasn't in the mood to get into an argument over the way I had ended things with him—he hadn't liked what I had had to say about affect, labour, balance. It was sad to see him engage in that evasion typical of people who are dumped, placing a target on the way they had been dumped rather than on the why. It was like watching a man revert into a teen.

Cole and I continued walking on the road that curled around the port, through crowds of tourists who had come to get a sense of how this island had looked when there were slaves… I asked Cole about his teaching. He spoke about the students and seemed to forget about the memories that were supposed to be in between us on the sidewalk. I was glad that I had invited him out, that things weren't going as I had envisioned, that Cole seemed to be radiating that passion that had drawn me to him so long ago.

We arrived at the entrance of the riverboat, and I gave my name to a strikingly pale and beautiful white woman in, of all things, a pink blazer and jeans. Cole seemed still too caught up with me to notice her, or anyone else we had passed that day.

A recent ex had invited me to the wedding. I felt comfortable bringing Cole because she had left me to return to her partner, and some time had passed. We entered the boat and both went to the washroom. I stood outside Cole's after he entered, remembering the time we'd had sex in the stall of the café on Concordia's campus, and how awkward it had been, perhaps only good for the feeling of risk when fucking in a public place. A person came up behind me and

took me from the trance, and I followed them into my washroom. Everything was pink—sink, stalls, walls—and I entered the first stall to find rose petals on the water reserve. I peed out the drinks we'd shared before the metro, and looked at the pink stall wall, the imposed colour revealed by a missed spray by the gray handle. I stared, felt alone.

Cole was rubbing a rose petal between his fingers when I exited.

"You alright?" he said, with what seemed like genuine concern.

"Got lost," I said.

"Okay," he said. "Did I dress formally enough? I met a man in the bathroom in a tux. A real, authentic tux. Like Bond."

"A friend's friend's wedding," I said. "No consequences if we're underdressed. Worst case, we're thrown overboard."

"If I was thrown in, would you follow me?" he said, pushing my shoulder. "Hey?"

"Would they know we were associated?" I said.

"Who?" said Cole.

"The crew—if they threw you in, are you asking would I jump in voluntarily, or knowing that I'd be up next anyway?" I said. We had stopped at the bottom of a staircase that lead to the deck, where a string quartet was playing soul.

"Voluntarily," said Cole. "As if we were strangers. Would you out yourself, to join me?"

"Have you seen what's in this water?" I said, feeling that we were in a place away from time.

"Wow, okay," he said, smiling. "Good to know."

For whatever reason, I held his hand.

He held mine in turn but didn't acknowledge it otherwise; we walked up the stairs to the deck.

The orange June sky was melting into purple with the evening. There were strings of lights around the rails of the ship, providing electric light against the looming swallow of the darkness. Waiters were moving about with trays of champagne flutes, drawing the younger people on board as a twig accumulates bugs when moving downstream. A string quartet was playing variations of Bach, Coltrane, and Kendrick Lamar, and Cole released my hand to cut through the younger swarm toward the drinks. He took four of the flutes, which the waiter permitted with a tight smile.

I received a flute in each hand, and drank one straight away.

"Okay then," said Cole, eyebrows raised.

"There's one thing," I said, wiping my mouth. "The friend, whose friend's wedding it is, I was seeing this person a bit after us, you don't know this person, but we're just friends now."

"Convenient fucking detail to forget!" he said.

"I didn't think it would be a problem—we're here as friends, right?"

"Who hold hands," said Cole.

I blushed—I felt it—I looked out to the sky. Purple had covered the island, although there was a small tongue of orange to the East, above two mountains.

"This is sparkling wine," I said.

"You drank it like water," he said.

"I thought it was champagne," I said.

"So, you try things before thinking, is what you're saying?"

"Funny," I said.

“So who is it? Him? Or, him?” Cole was motioning to various musicians—the violinist and cellist—for whatever reason omitting the men playing drums and bass.

“I’d rather not play this game,” I said. “We can leave now, if that would be more comfortable for you.”

The boat unmoored from the land—the band didn’t miss a note. Cole tilted his head toward the starboard edge, looking to the water, and smiled a resigned smile.

“You first,” I said.

Cole drank both flutes in succession.

“Coward,” I said.

“Let’s see you play the hero,” he said, blinking away tears from the carbonation.

I drank back my last flute and turned to him.

“Wait here,” I said.

“I’m waiting,” said Cole.

I approached Alaia—from whom Cole had taken the flutes—and waited for her tray to empty.

“You,” she said.

“You,” I said. “You said this was your friend’s wedding.”

“It is,” she said, “I’m friends with everyone.”

“Who should I say I know?”

“Ella and Jason. And your friend is quite a confident kid,” said Alaia, nodding to Cole.

“My friend,” I said, “is Cole.”

She looked as if she had seen a ghost.

“Friend,” I said.

“Right,” said Alaia, loosening her shoulders. “I’ve had a lot of those friends.”

“How are you?” I said.

“How do I look?” she said, giving full eye contact and squaring her shoulders with mine.

“Good,” I said, feeling light.

“Follow me,” she said, pulling me by the arm. I followed her to the stairs and looked at Cole as I did, who seemed a mix of startled and impressed.

Below deck, Alaia opened a short door with a skeleton key, something old but that seemed still to function in spite of the years. I followed her in the small space and found a room of cases of Veuve Cliquot.

“This isn’t what you’re serving right?”

“No, they’re cheap,” said Alaia, shooting a cork into the ceiling. “This is for a funeral tomorrow.”

“They have funerals on boats?” I said, drinking from the bottle that she passed.

“It’s an Irish wake,” said Alaia, “they put the body on a table and you get drunk with it.”

“Like an open casket,” I said.

“But with booze,” said Alaia, taking a long haul and readjusting her heart-patterned bowtie. “You make cheers to the body, share stories about the body, when it was alive.”

“I guess that’s more honest, what everyone in the crowd would rather be doing,” I said.

“The toasts? It’s like at a wedding. You couldn’t tell the difference, really, in how they act, if you ignore the body.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Coming,” said Alaia.

“They let you do this?” I said, pulling on the bottle.

"They pay us so little, they have to, so we don't report them," said Alaia, removing ten bottles from the case and placing them in five neat rows of two on the floor, using order to suggest that nothing had changed. She took the last bottle from the box, and lead me away, stashing the bottle in a utility closet before leading me to the outside railing. She threw the flattened box into the water, then leaned in to kiss me. I leaned back.

"What are you doing?"

"What?" she said.

"What?" I said.

"I didn't think it'd be a problem," she said.

"Do you remember the last thing you told me?" I said.

"*Come get wasted for free?*" she said.

"*I'm not angry at you, I'm just angry that I didn't dump you earlier,"* I said.

"That," she said.

"Yes, that," I said.

"Why'd you come?" she said.

"For the free champagne! *Free champagne as friends,"* you said. "*Bring a friend.*"

"Nobody actually wants their ex to bring a friend," she said. "Let alone their ex."

"I should go," I said.

"Cole's waiting, I take it? That's him?" she said.

"It is, yes," I said, leading the way up the stairs, not looking back to see if she joined.

Cole was talking with a beautiful woman with long black hair and wide green eyes. His fingers were plugging both of his ears. I nudged his shoulder, introduced myself to the woman.

"Isabelle," she said.

Cole removed his fingers from his ears.

“The music too loud?” I asked.

“Izzy was telling me it’s something she does with kids—most say they hear the ocean, or an avalanche,” said Cole.

“You work with kids?” I said, to Isabelle.

“Try to,” she said. “What do you do?”

“I actually know Izzy, it’s wild she ended up here with us,” said Cole.

“Can you keep a secret?” asked Isabelle, to me.

“Ask Cole,” I said.

“No,” said Cole.

“Hmm,” said Isabelle, righting herself, noticing too much about the discomfort. “Well, it isn’t the most damning secret: I’m just here because a friend of mine is a server, said she could get me free champagne all night at this boat wedding. Why not, right?”

“I’d take that deal!” said Cole.

“I forgot something downstairs—Cole can you help me for a minute?” I said.

“Oh—sure,” said Cole. “Izzy, do you mind?”

“I’ll be fine,” said Isabelle, nodding. “I was alright before I found you, wasn’t I?”

“True!” said Cole. “Back soon!”

“Nice to meet you,” I told her.

Isabelle smiled, and we went off. We took the stairs down, under the light of hanging white lanterns, now the only light in the dark sky. The quartet was playing Lamar’s “She Needs Me” at the same tempo as the original, unlike so many covers that are played deliberately slow—with curses sung as ironic ballads to suggest that art may be found at the intersection of

humorous contrast and lazy imitation, tearing apart beautiful things that have happened to produce some skeleton of a thing in the present.

"We didn't have coats," said Cole.

"I found a bottle of champagne," I said, leading him by the hand to the janitor closet.

It was locked.

"You don't have to lie to take me away from them," said Cole.

"A joke? Don't make me regret it," I said, stepping back from the door. A waiter turned the corner and I pulled Cole in for a kiss, one of those hungry ones you exchange when you just meet. The waiter passed.

"Okay," said Cole. "You don't know if I'm dating someone, you could have asked."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just assumed. Are you dating someone?"

"I don't think so," said Cole.

"Watch out," I said, standing back from the door.

"You're going to break your ankle. Here let me do it," he said.

I kicked the place of the door handle. The door swung open. The closet was smaller than I remembered but would still do.

"Double-Oh-Seven," said Cole.

"Get in," I said, pulling him by the sleeve and shutting the door, finding no light switch. I turned on my phone, found a chair, and placed it under the door handle.

"Okay what the fuck is happening," said Cole.

"The bottle is somewhere here," I said, looking in the shelf where it had been left. I couldn't find it.

"*There's a bottle downstairs,*" said Cole, mocking me.

“It was here,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“Sources on the inside,” I said.

Alaia must have returned for it, I thought.

“You could’ve just asked me,” said Cole.

“Fuck me,” I said.

“Shut up,” said Cole.

I pulled up my dress.

A few minutes later he was flicking my clit with his tongue—something new. I didn’t mind it, and then I did—he was circling for too long. He seemed to sense this and crossed over the hood, which sent sparks through my stomach, and then he flicked again, and I told him to suck it, and he did and it made me jump inside, and then he slid in two fingers and pulled up lightly—something old that he knew would work—and my inner thighs shook. He seemed to be turned on by this because he started taking off his belt, and I pulled him by his hair because I wanted him full inside me, and I kissed him, and tasted a hint of myself, and he came into me slow, although I was wet, and when he was full inside me I bit his ear and it started to bleed. He swore and my ass pressed against the counter and I bucked back into him—something new for him, it seemed, or something he’d forgotten—and he pulled back with his stomach curled in and he breathed out and said “wait” and I did for a second before pulling him into me again and he arched my pelvis up so that his dick would hit up against my g-spot as he leaned back and to grind up and rode harder into him I was coming closer to cumming when I pushed him back and rode down so that he was full against my g-spot and he put his hand over mine to touch myself, and I was doing half circles and close to cumming but was holding myself off to see if I could

hold it in before he came, as though I would allow him to fuck me but I wouldn't let him make me cum, and then I thought of Alaia, and I tried to slow the tingling in my pelvis but it was too close and I went with it and I came. Cole exhaled, as if having completed a race, or knowing we were competing and that he'd won, now likely wanting a blowjob.

The door swung open: Alaia yelled, holding an empty bottle of champagne, before rushing out.

"Jesus!" said Cole.

The chair had slid to the ground when the door had opened. I felt that that I should feel terrible—because I knew then that it was over with Alaia—but I didn't. I wondered if I'd done this to make her jealous, or because I hadn't ever wanted back together with her, or if it was simply the comfort of a familiar feeling, after fucking someone who listened to what you wanted, and still knew enough about your body to predict which buttons would trigger reactions, like old dancers who meet after years apart and still mesh enough to rebuild the base of a dance.

A few minutes later, in need of a drink to wash down the pineapple-flavoured cum—I wondered if he had continued eating pineapple for me, or if it had become a habit he wasn't aware I had imposed—we found a waiter and a few glasses. Alaia was nowhere in sight. We said hi to Isabelle, who was engrossed in conversation with a wealthy white woman… the new couple was having their first dance as bride and groom, to Bill Withers' "Use Me."

We walked to the back of the ship with arms linked, and found a crew of career smokers. Their faces were lit by strings of anchor-shaped lights that were nailed to the upper deck, and the smoke rushed behind everyone and out to sea. The rail on the side was scratched but seemed sturdy. Cole leaned against it—he pulled me in. I looked away from his rosy face and to the stars, which were easier to spot out here on the river.

“North Star?” he said, trying to share my view.

“No,” I said.

“Big Dipper?” he said, squeezing my ass.

“I don’t believe in constellations,” I said.

“What’s there to believe? They’re right in front of you,” he said.

“It seems imposed, patterns that aren’t there,” I said. “Plus most of these stars are dead. They exploded. It just hasn’t reached us yet.”

“So we’re looking at something that doesn’t exist,” he said.

“Right.”

There was a silence in our conversation, in sync with the sound of the water whooshing under the boat.

“This coming from the woman who believes in horoscopes!” said Cole.

“That’s completely different!” I said.

Cole turned back to the ship, laughing. He seemed to notice something behind me. I turned and didn’t see anything. He pointed to a glass case that contained an axe.

“What,” I said.

“Look,” he said, pointing to the top of the case. There was a dusty glass bottle jammed behind the painted letters IN CASE OF EMERGENCY BREAK GLASS. The smokers left us. Cole removed his wooden-soled shoe.

“Sure you want to open that?” I said.

“Yes.”

“It’s old. You never know what could be in there—spiders, mice.”

“I like spiders,” said Cole.

I took the shoe from Cole's hand and crushed the glass. The dusted material collapsed into large pieces, like dominoes, soft and predictable, the sound of the clatter muffled by an approaching engine. Another ship came alongside the boat. It passed at a close distance. It was a police boat. A spotlight shone on us—making shadows of us against the smashed box and door—before passing on. The pale orange searchlight doubled over the purple water before it disappeared. I reached in the case and took the bottle, a bottle of Scotch from 1986. I twisted the cork top and placed the bottle at Cole's mouth. He looked at me, opened his mouth, and I poured the fiery liquid down the back of his tongue.

6

Cole

I lead Lily to a pew. She slumped. Her purse opened. Pill bottles rolled over her lap, to mine. She didn't look down to the bottles that landed on the church floor. Her aunt, Shona, seated in front of us, turned in her flowered hat and passed a pink bottle that had rolled beneath her ankles. Lily extended her hand to retrieve the bottle—Shona held her hands over Lily's. She didn't acknowledge me before turning back.

"She didn't even notice me," I said.

Lily didn't say anything for a minute. Then:

"Were you best friends?"

Lily had been loud—Shona turned.

And then the priest stood and thanked us for being there, as if on behalf of the body. Lily twisted a bottle quickly and blue pills flung out, *tick-tick-ticking* around our bench. The priest tripped on a Canadian flag—which I had seen Lily's grandmother take from the casket earlier, replacing it with the white and blue Quebecois flag, although her son had spent most of his life in Ontario. The priest leveled himself by catching a handle on the casket. There was a collective inhale of shock in the audience—he laughed, and righted his dress. The priest then returned to the lectern.

"Like Beyoncé in her album, *Lemonade,* Derek never shied away from being honest about what bothered him, and being straight with the people he loved. Over the past few days, I've heard dozens of stories of how his honesty and patience served as an excellent support as a friend, teacher, husband, and father. Let us pray for Derek, so that he may continue his legacy of integrity and solidarity as he passes into Saint Peter's pearly gates."

Lily did not join her Aunt in the prayer.

"He literally just referenced *Lemonade,"* I whispered, "at a funeral."

She sighed. "He name-drops whenever he's trying to stop from being vulnerable. He and daddy grew up together."

Lily started to cry. I placed an arm around her shoulders and hugged her. Her aunt turned to me with a scowl. How much did she know—did she know something I didn't? Aunt Shona had always seemed to me that type of judgmental person who judges others to ward off being judged themselves, acting defensively under the fearful belief that everyone in a given room is as judgmental, if not more.

"Rihanna's *Work—"* the priest began, before bursting into tears.

The crowd followed suit, as if reading from the same hymn. The priest placed a hand over his mouth to stifle himself—Lily removed my hand from her shoulder and fled the building through the aisle. I got up to follow her, Aunt Shona glaring after me.

I found Lily out front, leaning on the statue of Archangel Michael, vaping. When she saw, she turned away. Then, she fell into me.

"Are you okay?" I whispered.

Lily's nostrils released vapor around our faces for what seemed a long time, as though her insides were on fire.

"Go for a walk?" I whispered.

She nodded, returned the vaporizer to her purse. We turned the corner of the church and entered a courtyard. A bench protruded from the wall of uncut sandstone, above a small garden of blue and yellow tulips. There were occasional flat, green spaces of limestone in the wall, on which perched carvings of birds and cherubs. Beside the bench was a statue of a man. I approached it to read the inscription; it was Jean Mckenzie De la Patriote, the congregation's first priest who was, apparently, buried below our feet. The uneven stone in the wall behind the bench was worn in places where bodies must have leaned against it. The wall also had long black streaks, which seemed like the result of years of rain. I had a feeling that the bricks had oxidized because they were placed beside others that had caused a reaction.

At that moment, Tailor—Lily's nephew—ran into the courtyard. Like Lily's brother, his skin was much darker than hers. Tailor had his grandmother's smile: mouth half-opened to show his top rows of teeth, with eyes shut.

"Tailor!" I said. The boy gave me a high five and jumped on Lily's lap. Lily swiped away a trail of drying tears with her index finger.

"How are you?" said Lily, shaking the boy up and down.

"They told me to come find you!" yelled Tailor, pulling on her hoop earring. Lily removed his small fingers from the wood.

"Who?" said Lily, making a show of looking confused.

"*You!*" said Tailor, laughing. "Dad told me!"

"Oh—you're looking for *Lily?* Yes, I think I saw her pass by five minutes ago—I think she went that way!" said Lily, pointing to the corner of the church from which we'd came.

"No!" said Tailor, "it's *you!* I *found* you!"

"How do you know?" said Lily.

"Because of *this*," said Tailor, pointing and then touching a black beauty mark under her right eye. Lily smiled, and then tried to hide it.

"But many people have that!" said Lily. "I'm sorry, you're going to have to keep looking. Maybe Mr. Cole can help you out."

Tailor and Lily looked to me, and I bent down to him.

"*See!* Uncle Cole doesn't have one!" said Tailor, poking my white skin in the same spot as Lily's.

"You're right, it's me," Lily confessed. "You got me."

"I knew it," said Tailor. "I *always* knew it. Plus you were here with Uncle Cole, so obvious!"

"As Lily, can I ask you a question?"

"No," said Tailor.

"Please?"

"*Fine,*" Tailor agreed.

“When did you start calling Cole, ‘Uncle Cole’? I’m asking because I’ve never heard you say it,” said Lily.

“Ever since today!” said Tailor.

“Oh,” I interjected. “And why today?”

“Because Granny said so,” Tailor replied. Lily’s smile faltered and her eyes widened, first with surprise and then what seemed like withheld anger.

“Okay, I think you should go tell her you found me,” said Lily. “Tell her you found *Auntie* Lily. Can you do that?”

For a moment longer, Tailor sat still on her lap. Then he leapt off as if having been stung by a bee, yelled “BYE!” and sprinted to the front of the church. He stopped at a garden that hugged the corner of the church, which I’d noticed on walking Lily in. It was a strange mix of Christmas basil, rosemary, and Linnaeus rhubarb, peppered with cigarette butts. Tailor pulled up a blue tulip, called, “Bye again!” and ran around the corner, out of sight.

I sat with Lily. She leant down towards the feet of the priest’s statue, reached behind, and produced a bottle of absinthe.

“What!” I cried.

“What?” said Lily, twisting off the cap.

“When did you even have the time to stash that there?” I said, laughing.

“I can’t have secrets now? You have to know everything?” she said.

I sighed and looked at the wall behind us, at the moss that had formed between the bricks over aging mortar.

“My mother’s relentless,” said Lily, holding the open bottle on her lap.

“Is that so bad?” I said, looking to her. She held my gaze.

“I’m not broken, Cole.”

“I’m not suggesting you are.”

“You’re looking at me as if I am,” said Lily. “As if every time I’m being quiet I’m just thinking about how sad I am, like I’m some passive thing. Well I’m not. I can speak. I don’t need to be stoic to the end.”

I grabbed the bottle from her lap and took a long sip. She said “Hey!” and got up from the bench to wrestle me for the bottle. I coughed and coughed and held the bottle in the air, but we were the same height and she caught the bottom with an outstretched arm. I tickled her armpit with my free hand and she recoiled, laughing like she would inside our apartment. The world buzzed.

“Kids kids,” said her mother, passing the garden on the corner, holding the severed head of a tulip.

Mrs. White was a short woman with piercing eyes and plump cheeks. We straightened up as we had done so many times before with her, when caught as teenagers. Lily sighed, and raised her eyebrows.

“I’m looking for an *Auntie* Lily,” said her mother, having first returned the raised eyebrows to Lily, before having turned to pose me the question. “You haven’t seen her, have you?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” I said.

“And you?” she said, turning to Lily. “Have you run into her, by chance?”

“No. And I haven’t come upon any uncles, either,” she said, returning her mother’s stare.

“Oh give me that damn bottle,” said her mother, and I obliged without thinking. She took a deeper pull than I had.

“Damn!” I said.

Lily looked to me.

“It’s powerful, that’s impressive,” I said.

“Since when do you drink?” said Lily, turning back to her mother.

“Are you keeping tabs?” said her mother. Lily walked over to her mother, looked her full in the eyes, took the bottle, and drank and drank. She leapt and coughed and coughed and coughed.

“That poor priest,” said her mother, to me.

“Yes, Mrs. White.”

"Calling me *miss* now, Uncle Cole? And he should have called in a replacement. Why did he had to play the hero? I am certain there are other very competent priests who could have filled in. We aren't in the village."

She shook her head, and leaned on my shoulder with one hand.

"I agree, I felt bad for him, but he should've called a replacement," I said.

"Can I tell you something?" her mother asked, turning me towards her with a strength belied by her physique. Lily was returning from her run around to slow the coughs, and would soon be within ear's reach. "Don't spend your time feeling bad for people, dear," she said, speaking low and slow, as if it was a code to be deciphered. "Instead, take action."

She leaned her head down and raised her eyebrows to me, as if trying to get a better look at me or examining my reaction. Lily put her arms around her and hugged her, crying, and she kept eye contact with me. She said, "It's going to be fine, dear, it doesn't stay this way. *He* wouldn't want you this way. *You*'re going to be fine. *We*'re going to be fine."

After the service was a reception at a neighbouring hall of quartered cucumber sandwiches and wine. I ate with Brian—who had showed up late with Jack; which didn't make sense, until it did—then my father, who had driven up with some women from the village. We talked about my sister, and then baseball, and then golf, arguing over records, whether Tiger's should have been worth more than Nicklaus', because of the level of competition during Tiger's more recent victories. My father argued against my point about Woods, and, when I returned to refill our drinks, I wondered if he believed in his argument so much, or if he had simply wanted to rile me up. He had to work in the morning, and so he gave his drink to Brian, who chugged it

down before hugging me and kissing Jack and leaving with my father. I stood with Jack, who seemed more himself, as I remembered him being when we were playing in forts as kids.

"One of the great things about books is that sometimes there are fantastic pictures," he said.

"So you're finally onto the new Presidents?" I said, laughing.

"I inherited a mess with jobs, despite the statistics, you know, my statistics are even better, but they are not the real statistics because you have millions of people that can't get a job, OK?," he said, giving an impressive imitation of Trump. His imitations were, in fact, always impressive.

"That's frightening."

"I know," he said. "But maybe it's all just a distraction. What he says. To distract us."

"Or himself, from the work he has to do," I added.

"The great thing about this game is that even the bad days are wonderful," said Jack.

I noticed Lily was no longer in the room.

"I'm gonna take a piss," I said.

"I'll be right here," said Jack, turning to talk with Ms. White.

I walked to the washrooms in the basement, and knocked on the women's bathroom door. Nobody answered. I went in the men's washroom, still in a dizzy high from the absinthe. The bathroom was empty. I walked into a stall. A plastic Jesus figurine stood on the toilet's tank, looking at me… I picked it up. The plastic Jesus wore a red plastic Superman cape that seemed

to have been glued on; someone had invested time in creating the hybrid thing, and this Jesus was black. I put it in my pocket. I returned to the reception and found the crowd had thinned—Lily's mother was now speaking with a few of the mothers from the village, still doing her best in spite of the death. I found Jack at the wine and asked if he'd seen Lily.

"She's probably outside, let's take a couple to go," he said, putting his arm around me. We filled four of the red plastic cups with wine and left the reception area. Lily's mother touched me on the shoulder as I passed, while still speaking with the other women.

We found Lily outside with Danny, Tailor's father, who was making a career in the village as a grain farmer, but also buying up swathes of waterfront properties along the canal, refurbishing the classic structures for a new generation of urban couples who were looking for 'rural chic'. They were leaning on the flatbed of Danny's truck, laughing. Danny had never seemed to like me—not even as kids, when we had all looked up to him, as Lily's older brother. Once, drunk at Christmas, Lily told me it was because of the interracial thing, but I felt it must have been more than that. I wished he had been around to witness one of my fights.

When we approached, Lily was wiping away tears—from laughing, it seemed—with her middle finger, after Danny had ended on the punchline, "…and the chicken was fucking the kitten! Kitten-fucker!" Danny offered me a warm welcome—shaking my hand for the first time—and thanked me for the wine.

"It was Jack's idea," I said.

"I'm sure it was," said Danny.

As we spoke about our jobs, Lily seemed more to be watching me speak with her brother than listening to what we were saying.

"Work work work work work *work*," exploded from the window of a parked hearse, a rental that the priest was returning.

"You okay to drive?" yelled Danny.

"I don't drink," the priest said, attempting to smile.

"What about the *blood of Christ?"* said Danny, smiling.

"My body is a wonderland."

We laughed, and the long car pulled away in an S—backing out and then around a plot of trees that separated the parking lot from the road.

"Something, isn't it?" said Danny, pointing to the church.

"The church?" said Jack.

"*No*, the *trees*," said Lily.

"Don't be so mean," said Danny. "The building is something else."

"I wonder who made it," I said, nervous that Danny might return to the old self that I had thought I had known.

"Why?" Danny queried.

"There's a statue of the priest out back, but nothing about the people who actually built it," I said, now feeling as if I was entering a trap; a tomb where the door might slide shut.

"Fucking good point," said Danny, drinking his wine.

"Right," said Lily.

We were all looking at the church. The old building was lit up by two spotlights on either side of the central door, shadows forming in the places where the old stone jutted out from the building, so that it seemed that those portions of the building were as empty as the night sky.

"Who made more of an impact on the people who lived here, at the time?" Lily continued. "The priest, or the architect?"

"Or the people who put in the work to build it," I said.

Danny said, "They're turning it into a firing range."

We laughed. Lily smacked him on the back. "Hey!" said Danny, and then, returning to his thought, "No. Seriously. It was for sale." We stopped laughing—Jack was the last of us to stop. "I even seen the deal they got; I play cards with the man. Part firing range, part bakery, he says. Says they'll sell cupcakes shaped like little crosses, little bullets."

7

Lily

I didn't know how to tell him… Cole never let me drive. We had argued about this, of course, with no resolution, once upon a time. Now, I didn't have the energy to argue. It seems to me that two people share a limit of how well they can be connected, and how much they can fight—wars often end more from exhaustion from domination. I liked to look over the fields on 43, in any case, because it took my attention away from the rigidity of the yellow and white lines. It felt like arriving in a room of plants, after having been lost in cabinets. I was reminded of my own size within the field of plants… this was the first time we'd driven to Merrickville as friends. I was anticipating his father's face when I entered the house behind him, the warm words that would welcome me at dinner without explicitly telling me he was glad to have us back. There had been this sense of death when we broke up, as though it was all a failure.

We passed the fields and entered the portion of the highway that cut through the woods. I wondered what Satinder might think if they saw me in the car with Cole, after the last time I'd been down and we'd celebrated our being single together.

Cole pulled over.

Cole

I hadn't been as excited to return home in a long fucking time. I was looking forward to seeing stars and the sky at night. The smell of a bonfire and the heat from the flames around which you drank with people you'd probably love no matter what. Dudes who'd had your back in fights, who'd saved you from falling off roofs, out of car doors.

Lily was quieter than usual. I wondered if she was regretting driving together. It did feel awkward—although we'd taken the trip so many times. It seemed that we'd run the course on this power dynamic.

I pulled over on the shoulder. It was getting dark. Deer approached the car and skipped through our headlights, across the empty road. I asked if she wanted to drive.

Lily

I was better than before, although I hadn't driven in a while. Cole joked about me training in private, which I laughed at before screeching the breaks to avoid a deer. We sat in the still car as the rest of the family crossed the road.

Cole was talking about the deer as we approached the gap beneath the train bridge that crossed the St. Lawrence River, where our town's founder had drowned a man, and passed underneath. The road seemed unchanged since I had last seen it, until we turned the corner and saw the flood.

Water up to the second-story window of my old bedroom… I thought about all the things that might float out.

"How did we not know about this?" gasped Cole.

It had been raining—this, we had known—but I had never considered the possibility of a flood. (On the island of Montreal, the water had also risen, but no locals really spent any time by the vanishing sections of the Old Port.) I saw the tip of our neighbour's smaller house. I wondered what had happened to their cats… the car's floodlights ricocheted from the water onto the logs of our house, revealing a group of loons floating by my brother's old window. I checked my purse, to make sure that the pills were still inside. A lone loon swam in the space where the front lawn had been, eating Cheerios swollen to the size of toonies. I wondered if it was the father.

Cole

Dinner went well. My father apologized for not telling us about the flood, saying he hadn't wanted to burden us. Lily exhaled. She started explaining about her house. My father nodded. He told her to wait and went to the basement. We looked at each other, said nothing; it felt like a shared moment of empathy. When Dad came back up the stairs, he was cradling her cat, Mr. Rolex. Apparently they had found the cat floating on an old plastic copy of *Ulysses* Lily'd had as a child. My father told her that Angela had told him insurance was going to cover the house, that she was out of town for a convention and had asked him to take care of the cat. My father hated cats—it didn't click. Lily hugged dad. I petted the cat like a dog, never knowing what to do with them. The creature ran back to Lily. We opened a bottle of Shiraz, and our shared look, together,

was less anxious than before, I felt, as if we were excited for something that was about to happen.

Lily

Before dinner, I had walked through the old forest. I found a fort where we'd tied each other up as kids, playing cops and drug dealers with the Fosters, Palmers, and Legaults. These families had populated our schools, breaking up family alliances in our games, only to have siblings reconcile when it mattered—on the walk home, after someone's pain was recognized as real. Siblings tried to make each other laugh, partly out of love and partly so they wouldn't be forbidden to play in the woods, as had happened with the Rowlands after an incident with gasoline. Once, tired of being cast as the drug dealer, I'd passed the Ziploc bag of flour to Cole and the boys, informing them that I would now be a cop with the other girls. I told them that it their turn to play the criminals. Brian's hesitation seemed to lighten when realizing that I might be tying him up. Cole instead protested by removing himself and dragging his heels in the acting scenes. He however ran faster than I'd ever seen him run after we revealed ourselves to be cops, and showed showed the grace of a monkey when shimmying up a distant pine. Brian had tripped and extended his wrists for me to tie, which I let Satinder do while I continued on to the base of Cole's tree.

Now I wondered if I had found the right tree. I'd cut my shin on a rock in a stumble during the broken drug deal, and it stung. Then I noticed this blue shoe-lace, and yelled at him to come down. He didn't.

"I have to go home," I yelled.

"Oldest trick in the entire book," he'd yelled back across the empty spaces, over the tips of those trees, into the high and emptier spaces of the forest where you could occasionally see into town.

Deer had emerged in a corridor along the tall, rusted fences. The fenced space had been cleared for *canis lupis* (which I'd always read as being for dogs). The deer had stood still when they noticed me. They then exited the path to walk around me, Cole and the tree.

Cole was still hesitant to descend, and I wasn't sure if it was because of the deer—why they'd approached, or why they'd turned away—or if it was out of his resistance to me and my new role in the game, how he might have had to recalibrate my ability to play several roles.

Around that same season, we caught fireflies in jars on Brian's property. I'd caught the most, and Brian had been unhappy about it. I'd left him and Cole, running ahead on my own to find enough that would make my victory stand without question.

Skipping through the swampy edge of the field, I'd sprinted between lines of corn that rose above my head. In some ways, it felt like running underwater. It was then I had a sense that Cole or Brian or another boy was at my heels.

Not wishing to lose time, or be caught, I hadn't looked back. I couldn't hear anyone behind me, and so I slowed to a jog. When I finally looked back, I saw no-one. I approached a clearing in the corn and came upon a wolf. I froze. (Only now do I know they rarely travel alone). The wolf had noticed me and ducked—either to spring away, hide, or lunge.

I remember dropping the jar and turning away from the animal, racing back the way I'd come. Too frightened to check where the wolf was, I couldn't help thinking how quiet a wolf could be, with paws that press silently against the earth.

When I hit the long wooden logs at the intersection of the country fence, I turned. The field behind me was full only of corn. The sky had started to darken—the spaces I could see were starting to shrink. I ran to tell everyone about the wolf.

I identified the boys by following the floating jars of light. I considered returning for mine, but the bats had arrived and it was unlikely I'd have caught any more fireflies. There was a hole in the jar, so I felt the bugs I had caught would be okay.

That night, there were more than usual in the swampy part of the field. I tried to catch them in my bare hands, but they flew too high, and were swallowed by the bats before I had a chance to save them.

Cole

I was waiting in the woods with a dented Louisville I'd found in the old garage.

It was early enough that the shop wasn't yet open—I assumed Jennifer was still at home—so I waited. I hadn't been here in a while. Had I ever stood here, in this exact place in the weeds, in sight of a truck's discarded engine? And who had stood here before I or the truck had come into the world? I leaned the bat against a tree trunk and began to climb. I hadn't ever climbed this tree—having spent most of my time smoking inside the cab of the decaying truck beside—and I found a piston, poking from a branch.

Below, a pack of wolves entered the field from the forest. I felt safe, up there, and yet that something might happen if they noticed me. Some cubs met one of the wolves with little barks and nibbles. The whole group seemed to be moving together—something I'd never seen.

The pack continued to another entrance in the opposite forest. I looked back at the yard. The car that had been parked there was now gone.

I slid down the tree, picked up the bat and began to walk toward the house.

I was caught by the sight of the old truck. Sixty or so years it had sat there, in the rain and snow. I had sat in it to smoke and play cards with Brian as bees floated in and out. When I looked inside, it seemed more rusted than before.

It was then my foot sank into the something submerged in the dirt: the side of a washing machine, overgrown with weeds. The rusted metal tore my pants and cut my leg as I pulled it out. I swore, then laughed. It had been years since I'd fallen through anything out here.

I limped into the yard, waiting to make sure the house was empty—that there wasn't a new partner inside, or friend. I huddled behind an old garage. We'd placed a lock around the handle of the garage, as kids, after our previous fort had to be abandoned because of a wasp infestation.

It was warm outside and I noticed the sweet smell of surrounding purple lilacs. I waited another minute, before approaching the house.

I dragged the bat, so that I might let it fall it in the cut grass if spotted.

I knocked on the front door. There was no response.

I pressed down on the handle—the door wasn't locked. The lights were off.

The pottery collection was still displayed in the same door-less cabinet. The porcelain still shone. Cocking the bat, I thought about the possibility of becoming the thing I had run away from; was still, I should, am, have been, could have.

I let the bat sit on the tiled counter while I poured out a glass of water.

My heart was beating, constant, unavoidable. I drank the cool water. I smelled the sweat on my clothes as I wiped my forehead. My leg was bleeding, but it didn't sting. I knew it would when I washed it with soap. A loud smack sounded, then a crash causing me to spill water on myself.

I looked over and noticed the bat had rolled to the floor, and some of the pottery had slid from the case, breaking against the blue floorboards. Leaning over to pick up the shards, I recognized the typeface. I picked up the familiar pieces, "take," "to the road," "me," and, "house." It seemed that a newer piece had also smashed along with it, as I found other fragments of a sentence. I gathered up the pieces into a canvas bag that hung by the recycling bin.

With my shoe, I swept up the rest of the shards. The newly empty space in the display showed like a lost tooth. I rearranged the pottery so that it seemed as clean and ordered as it had always been.

I decided to leave. As I turned to the front door, I saw them standing on the porch, peering at me through the glass.

Lily

Cole presented me with a gift at breakfast. A beautiful thing, really, this dish: a myriad of shapes that were incongruous, yet worked together. Both the message and the shape of the dish were lovely.

I told him I loved him, but couldn't accept it. He didn't take it well, in his usual way, nodding but saying nothing: stoic to the end. I urged him to keep it, because of what it meant to him.

He said, "I can't—I'll break it."

I laughed at that—the thing was a mix of already broken dishes—and was glad to find that that humour hadn't left us, that it was perhaps the only good thing we hadn't killed.

That afternoon, we ate with his father in his small backyard bordered by the forest. We drank whiskey. We smoked. I bought train tickets on my phone. We laughed. I was glad to be here; I knew it was time that I left. It felt as if I was trying to fall back asleep so I could get back into a dream that had ended, searching for something that did not exist.

Charles—the neighbour's new husky—was visiting us on the deck when I showed Cole the tickets. He told the dog how much he loved him, petting the thing and looking away from me, until Satinder picked me up.

Cole

I used to love the rain. I used to love the way it felt to walk in the shelter of an umbrella. I used to love the sound of the rain, the thousands of drops that fell from the sky to surround us on our streets, providing a new texture to the spaces between things that we rarely slowed down to experience.

I used to love the rain because it never made the stories we told each other, or the stories that were told about us; the way a person looked out the window when you drove them places, or the feeling when you sat across from them at a table together; The shared recognition when caught by the other's eyes, how the lines of the conversations are remembered as flashes in comparison to the memory of having been there together.

I used to love her.

I used to love the way that the trees moved with the wind, or our weight as we leapt through the branches, and the space between my heels and the earth covered in pine needles. I used to love the places on the forest floor where the sun fell in patterns, when you'd stand in the warmth and breathe in smoke and look up to the sky, or shut your eyes and focus on the warmth in the dark. You'd feel the wild turkeys brush past you, and even though you knew it was the birds you thought that they might be coyotes, and that, when you opened your eyes, they'd have you surrounded.

I used to love baseball the ability to open your leather glove to grab hold of something that meant something to everyone around you; how your actions shifted how things were going to continue.

I used to love playing football near the centre of the track with the fathers who'd woken up with me so early, when it was quiet enough in the young sunrise that their aging bones and

skin scraping against the grass were loud enough to hear. Their bodies would slide when they fell between the soccer nets that were permanently on either side of the field, gliding on account of unthawed frost.

5:37

Lily leaves the deck to wait in the front of the house for Satinder.

5:40

Lily is picked up by Hailey.

5:37-5:47

Cole sits on the deck, looking to the forest, then wrestling with the neighbour's dog.

5:48

Cole rushes in his father's house, grabbing keys and the dish.

He stops to tell his father where he's going, interrupting a baseball game.

"Get going," says his father, before he can.

5:59

Cole takes the inside shoulder of the C bend out of town, passing through villages and forests at twice the speed limit. There are deer in the fields, and coyote, and grey wolves (*canis lupus*).

He misses all of them, so focused on the road.

6:15

Cole runs a red in Brockville—nearly missing a cyclist—and another, nearly crushing half of a family, who are crossing together.

6:20

Cole arrives at the station. He pulls into the lot, sees Satinder's blue Toyota.

Parks.

6:21

Lily leaves the car and enters the station.

6:22

Cole removes the car keys from the ignition.

He feels the grooves of the steering wheel, turning it so the column shifts the tires.

He looks at the dish on the passenger seat.

6:25

Cole removes his seatbelt.

6:26

Cole opens the door, gets out.

6:27

Cole watches the train roll in,

while leaning on his father's car.

6:28

Cole watches the train roll out.

6:35

Returns to the driver's seat.

Starts the car.

Leaves the lot.

6:40

Parks at a nearby mall.

6:41

Leaves the car, carrying a duffle bag—the only one he could find in the house; once used for baseball—to a Harvey's.

6:42

Orders two chicken burgers.

"For here, or to go?" says an older employee.

"For here," says Cole.

6:45

The burgers arrive—a freckled teenaged attendant ready to personalize them.

"Hey there, what'd you like on it?"

"Just the chicken is fine."

"You sure?" says the teenager.

"Yes," says Cole.

"It's just not something you hear round here quite that often."

6:47

Sits.

Looks around the restaurant before opening the bag.

Notices a person, seated beside three children, across from a woman and a man.

Notices a man, in a hoodie, facing, staring

from the other side of the room.

6:48

He nods to the man,

returns his stare,

raises a chicken burger.

The man nods back,

reflects the chickenburger cheers

with a Pepsi.

6:49

Cole opens his backpack. He removes

the plate, slides on the burgers.

One lays off balance, threatens

to fall. The plate appears

too small to fit both,

although it seems it can

if they’re placed with care.