

The Wasted Land

Zoe Lambrinakos-Raymond

A Thesis  
in  
The Department of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts  
(English, Creative Writing Option) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2019

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**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**  
**School of Graduate Studies**

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By: Zoe Lambrinakos-Raymond

Entitled: The Wasted Land

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

Manish Sharma Chair

*Chair's name*

Ronjaanee Chatterjee Examiner

*Examiner's name*

Kate Sterns Examiner

*Examiner's name*

Sina Queyras Supervisor

*Supervisor's name*

Approved by Manish Sharma

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_ 2019

André G. Roy

Dean of Faculty

## ABSTRACT

### **The Wasted Land**

**Zoe Lambrinakos-Raymond, M.A.**  
**Concordia University, 2019**

My thesis project, titled “The Wasted Land,” primarily takes aim at T. S. Eliot’s seminal work, “The Waste Land.” While Eliot’s project was to alert readers to decay, both cultural and literal in terms of the cityscape, my project will explore the Montreal bar and rave scene in all its decadence and delirium.

The stories themselves, primarily narrated in the first person, will follow two narrators through their katabacal journeys into the bowels of Montreal and into the West of Canada. There are no ancestors there, no guides. The stories will take place over one summer, beginning in April and ending in August. The first narrator, Bea, will plunge into a world where cannibalism of women is most obvious: the sex industry. While Eliot moves East towards religion, J’s stories will backpedal in the opposite direction, the West (moving to Calgary), following a tradition of Romantic poetry where Nature may be the remedy to the city life and, more broadly, existence in the hyper-real 21<sup>st</sup> century. Of course, both options as solutions are equally tenuous.

Voice is a key component for my thesis project. Moreover, while Eliot’s work is poetry, the project will take an interest in a prose that is deliberately crafted, borrowing components from poetics such as cadence, alliteration, and metering. The suburban aspects of the project will deal with unpacking familial narratives and ideas of home (nostos).

There is an attempt here to “get to the bottom of it,” the “it” functioning in a myriad of ways: the city and the relationships contained within it, the family, the suburbs, the self.

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## Drank and Talked for an Hour

Bea: So, I'm doing door, and there's this mess of people, right, because everyone's trying to get in before Megalodon comes on at midnight, and these idiots show up at 11:50 thinking they'll get in and we're sold out. And there's this guy, buzzed out of his mind, clenching and sweating and basically just high as noon, who keeps asking me if this is the "Big Tooth" party. And so I jokingly tell him 'Nah, it's a wedding reception,' and this guy goes, 'Putain, le Uber m'as niqué,' and pulls out his phone to try and call his Uber driver back, freaking out that he got left at the wrong place. Never mind it's 11:50 and there's a bunch of half-dressed fourteen-year-olds and we're in St-Michel and this is clearly a warehouse. I mean, who the fuck would think this is a wedding reception? So now I'm trying to get the guy to calm down because he's got his Uber driver on the phone, he's somehow managed to get the most conscientious Uber driver in the city, and he's cussing him out and yelling he brought him to a wedding, and meanwhile he won't get the fuck out of the line and people are tripping out behind him and he's screaming at the Uber guy to come back and I'm waving my hands in his face telling him he's at the right party and all of a sudden he looks at me and asks me if I've got any coke.

J: Priorities. Should have given him my number. Hook a girl up.

Bea: Honestly, he could have used a bump. Straighten him out.

J: Or send him to Mars.

Bea: Dude was already extraplanetary. At that point, I figured, get him the fuck out of my line and get shit moving before Charlotte pops up and freaks out because there's a crowd of disgruntled people who want to go mosh and try and break the barriers. Did we get real barriers this time?

J: Nah, but Pat and Eric got two extra security guards to try and hold up the same old shitty

barriers down at the front of the speakers. Kids are trying to rush them every time the DJ has a drop. And it's still ADHD dubstep out there so that's about, uh, every minute?

Bea: We're getting too old for this.

J: Yeah, but where else can we bask in the basement culture of the electric bass scene, darling?

Bea: I wish you'd fucking stop calling me darling.

J: It's endearing. You're in a mood.

Bea: Shit's weird lately.

J: Tell me about. Adam's brought some new girl around. I've gotta say, I'm happy I'm not the one dating that idiot, but I feel inclined to let the girl know she's banging the least competent sound tech in the industry.

Bea: What do you care? I thought you were over that. Get by and get over, remember? As you told me for three weeks straight between gin shots and crying in my bathtub.

J: I thought we were done bringing that up.

Bea: I thought you were done bringing Adam up.

J: You're salty.

Bea: I'm dehydrated.

J: *(hands her the water bottle from her lap.)*

Bea: You're an absolute dream. *(Takes a sip.)* What are you into these days?

J: Same old, writing writing writing and when I'm not, pissing everyone off by complaining about writing.

Bea: You're almost done your degree, yeah?

J: Imminent. Much like my failures, my life, and destitute poverty.

Bea: We have that in common. Minus the degree getting.

J: Montreal not treating you right?

Bea: It's a sink whole.

J: Gonna move back to the shore?

Bea: I'm done my masochist phase.

J: Surprising.

Bea: And you? Done with the 450 yet? Gonna woman up and make the move across the St-Laurent?

J: I'm in therapy.

Bea: Miss fancy, got the time and money for a *professional*. Personally, I find nothing helps more than a good self-help book. Makes you feel shame for spending money on something so stupid that you snap out of it. But here I was thinking our talks were helping you.

J: My parents are paying. Perks of having an absentee workaholic father and mentally diseased mother.

Bea: That's new. Must be nice profiting from Daddy's money.

J: I think the guilt finally caught up. Or, you know, they tripped their shit when my sister told them I'd been squatting in our old house.

Bea: Why the fuck were you squatting in your old house?

J: I'm sentimental.

Bea: You are the least sentimental person I know.

J: I liked it there.

Bea: You bitched every time that you lived too far to do anything. You slept in parks. You told me you would tie your shoes together and put them between your knees when you slept on benches. Quite the little MacGyver.

J: Shut up.

Bea: Whatever you say, darling.

J: Fuck you

*(They both laugh.)*

J: It's rich hearing you bitch me out for my parent's money when I know for a fact your parents paid for years of figure skating and *that shit is not cheap.*

Bea: Yeah, they paid until I quit and shattered their dreams of having a world class Olympian daughter. They kicked me out after that, didn't want to sponsor a failure, I guess.

J: You want a key?

Bea: Yeah.

J: *(Sets it up, takes one. Passes the baggie to Bea and presses her right hand to her nose, inhales, tilts her head back.)* Fuck, this coke taste like gasoline.

Bea: Mmmmm, that good shit.

J: It's Leo's, so at least we know who to bitch out if one of us O. D's.

Bea: Nah, don't bother bitching. Not much of a loss in my case.

J: Fuck, you're really not having it tonight.

Bea: *(Takes a key.)* I think I just snorted an Ultramar station.

J: Doesn't make you nostalgic?

Bea: I never spent my time licking gas pumps.

J: You're missing out. That one on Lapinière and Bergerac? Cheapest gas in Brossard and 24 hours a day. It's as good as they come.

Bea: You're sick, you know that?

J: Only temporarily. My therapist says it's because of my parents.



Bea: Is it?

J: Maybe genetically. Otherwise, I don't know. I think I fucked a lot of it up myself.

Bea: Agency!

J: Free-will is overrated.

Bea: Better than the alternative?

J: Which is, what? Pre-destination?

Bea: At least then it's not your fault.

J: Everything is everyone's fault, including yours. Better?

Bea: I want another bump.

*(J passes her the baggie and the key. Bea snorts it, gags. Passes it back to J. J does a key. Snorts deeply.)*

J: I need to find a new guy.

Bea: I've got plenty.

J: I thought you were into women, as of late. Well, if nothing else, it's comforting to know that some things don't change, like you being a total whore.

Bea: Yeah, and your bottom of the barrel scrapping and still living in Brossard.

J: We can't all make it out of the 450 with call center jobs.

Bea: Yeah, big bucks.

J: Doesn't seem like you're having any trouble paying for blow. I mean, what, you blew 100 dollars on tonight alone. Last week I made a house call and gave you an eight ball. You've got a hole in your sinuses or something?

Bea: With enough effort.

J: You've always been tenacious.

Bea: Fuck you.

J: You couldn't afford it.

Bea: Makes one of us.

J: How much longer do we have to deal with this noise nonsense? It literally sounds like chainsaws fucking on top of a busted air conditioner.

Bea: (*Checking her phone.*) Another hour? I don't know, Len comes on at 3. You know he's too stoned to play anything but deep.

J: I actually want to see that. Last time he forgot how to mix and was just stopping and starting the CDJ's when he wanted to switch songs. I thought the crowd would be pissed, but between songs he was handing out nuggs of weed to random people and telling them to smoke everyone in the room.

Bea: He's basically stoner Jesus. Ratty beard and all.

J: That may be the only church I'd be willing to go to.

Bea: You in a church. That sounds like the real show.

J: I know. I had to go last week. My dad converted. I think after 25 years my mom finally wore him down.

Bea: Did he get in a baby pool full of holy water?

J: No, it was three hours of very tasteful indoctrination. My family went up to see the priest after and I tried to hang in the back; there's only about 12 people in my immediate family these days. The priest noticed, and so I'm trying to figure out a way to not kiss this old man's hand. I tried to give him a handshake. Thought it was going to work, too, until at the last second, he turns his palm down and slips it into mine, so I'm holding it. I kissed it. Power move, really. Not that I respect it, but I kind of do.

Bea: Your family is insane.

J: You sound like my therapist.

Bea: Shit.

J: What, it's not a bad thing. She's very smart.

Bea: What? No, not you. That girl over there? I fucked her. I think I fucked her? I don't remember. She fucked me. I puked in her bathtub.

J: You're a great houseguest.

Bea: I cleaned it out. She had this stupid dog. I haven't spoken to her since, she kept messaging me so I blocked her number.

J: Are you really trying to hide behind me?

Bea: You have big shoulders. Come on, help me out.

J: I'm not participating in this.

Bea: Shit, she's walking over here. Start talking about something.

J: They're going to start building the new Champlain bridge soon. I saw the maquette at the Brossard Library. It's huge. Literally huge. Not the maquette, obviously, but the bridge compared to the houses in the maquette? It's daunting. I don't know why it has to be so high, or big. Just build it smaller and quicker. Besides, you know how they build things in this city. The off ramp will go straight through my backyard. What used to be my backyard. They condemned most of the M section, figured they'd lead people straight through to Dix 30. Not important that I lived in that house my whole life, or that Dix 30 is an actual hell hole. Just bring people from the city to the capitalist pipe dream. It'll be real fucking pretty.

Annie: Beatrice! How have you been.

Bea: Hey! I'm good, I'm good. Keeping busy, have you met Joan?

J: J's fine.

Annie: Joan's a nice name.

J: I'll tell my mother, she'll be thrilled.

Bea: J's house is being demolished.

Annie: Are you also homeless.

J: Why does she think you're homeless?

Bea: It's an inside joke.

J: I thought I was your best friend. Now you have inside jokes with random bitches you fuck?

Annie: Your friend is nice.

Bea: She's a little inept.

J: My therapist says I lash out in conversations where I feel threatened. Please disregard my interjections. How's Bea in bed?

Annie: Look, I just came over to ask for 60 dollars for the cab you puked in on the way to my place a few weeks ago. I tried texting you about it.

Bea: I'm bad at phones. *(Pause.)* I puked in the cab?

Annie: Yeah, they sent a bill.

J: 60 dollars is pretty cheap.

Bea: I thought I puked outside the cab.

J: Seems you puked everywhere. Again, fantastic houseguest.

Annie: It got in the cab, too.

Bea: *(Opening her purse and pulling 20s out.)* Here.

Annie: *(Looking at Beatrice then J. Takes the money.)*

J: How's your dog, by the way?

Annie: Did I do something wrong?

Bea: Sorry, J's got no tact.

J: I swear I'm pleasant if you give me a chance.

Annie: Thanks for the money. *(Leaves.)*

Bea: What is wrong with you?

J: Are you not following this conversation? My parents, therapist, etc..

Bea: That was uncalled for.

J: What, you care what that girl thinks? Besides, now she won't bother you anymore. She's got some spiky nails. Fancy lady. You bagged a looker.

Bea: You're going to bankrupt your parents with all the help you need.

J: Maybe you can help out? That's an awful lot of 20s you've got stuffed in your purse.

Bea: I came right from work.

J: The call center pays in cash?

Bea: *(Opening her purse again, handing over ten 20s.)*

J: I was kidding about helping out.

Bea: I want an 8 ball.

J: *(Takes the money, fishes out the baggies from her purse.)* Sure, but pace yourself, okay?

Bea: *(Sets up a line on her phone.)*

J: You really are going to put a hole in your sinus.

Bea: Great, more holes. *(Sets a second line on her phone. Does one.)* You want one?

J: No thanks, I'm good.

Bea: *(Does the second one.)*

J: Shit, Beatrice.

Bea; What? I can't put it back in the bag. What am I supposed to do, save it for later?

J: What *are* you doing later?

Bea: Probably find an after party.

J: This thing shuts down at 6. The sun will be out. You really want to be staggering home in the sunlight down to Berri?

Bea: I've got sunglasses.

J: Doesn't sound that great.

Bea: You used to be fun.

J: I've got to drive back to Brossard in a bit. I'm sorry. I don't want to end up in the St-Lawrence.

Bea: You're going back to Brossard?

J: Where else would I go?

Bea: Anywhere. Everywhere. You've still got your car?

## Chronique

She tells me I fell out of a cab last night on the way to her place. We're in her bed. It has been snowing all of April. All of this month is itself so the exact date is not important. Whatever sun Montreal gets in the winter is filtered through clouds so the light coming into her room is just enough to see. My contact lenses are glued to my eyelids. It feels like a camera shutter every time I blink.

“So, are you homeless or something?”

Camera shutter.

The girl next to me in bed has the floral blankets pooled around her midsection, tits out in the early morning.

Camera shutter.

Is it morning? The light gives nothing away. Her bare foot brushes my bare foot.

I'm naked. I pull the flowers up to my clavicle. I tuck my arms over the blankets. I cocoon. *Where the fuck did my clothes go?* I realize the girl is looking at me.

“Are you?”

I tell her I have a house I live in.

I throw the blankets off and maneuver off the bed. I do this awkwardly, crawling off the end of the bed to avoid having my body perched over hers.

In the light I am so aware that I am naked. She has dried chrysanthemums in a white vase on her nightstand.

I find my pants tangled in her pants. I move to pick them up and my hip gives a warning shot, subtle low pain on my right side.

I untangle the pants; pass my hand through my hair.

“Have you seen my shirt?”

I want to ask her what the fuck happened but, clearly, I know. The night before I had gone out dancing with friends, double bottle deep-drunk and a hit of acid to take the edge off, or add more edges to slip off of. I remember bass music and misplaced hands. Something about a cab ride.

I find my phone under the shirt, which I pull over my head. I pick the phone up: seventeen missed calls, eighteen text messages.

I pull my pants on, underwear be damned at this point. I put my phone in my back pocket, feel my fingers brush a baggie that I pull out. Dandruff flakes cling to the inner plastic. Barely enough for a key so I gum it. I rub my fingers over my teeth, suck in saliva between my lips, thin line.

I had a hat.

“Have you seen my hat?”

The girl is sitting up in bed, tits still out.

“Do you have somewhere to be?”

I lie.

I bend over, hip still hurting, and peel through the rest of what’s on the floor: her underwear, her pants, pillows. She has a dog, a little rat thing that’s twirling between my ankles, yipping anxiously.

“Cute dog.”

His name is Petit. Petit has eyes like black saucers.

I’m still bent over and pet Petit because he is there and my hands can multitask. I find my purse under the bed.



“I think you vomited blood last night.”

I tell her I had rosé wine. She tells me that her bathtub is red and I tell her I’ll wash it out.

Her bathroom is filled with purple tiles. *This girl’s whole life is pastels.* The left side of her bathtub is a streaky red that fades into a granular sunset near the drain.

*Fuck.*

I turn the tap on, water gushing over the stains. I hand splash it to the back of the tub but it does nothing. I palm-flat rub the bottom of the tub and the water is coming out so fast that it foams over my whole hand. I scrape what I can from the sides, the back. This is the opposite of baptismal.

“It’s okay, you can leave it.”

I shake my head and continue to hand wash the porcelain until I’m satisfied that when she looks at it, she won’t remember me.

“I held your hair.”

“Thanks. You didn’t have to.”

Bent over, I look back.

She’s still naked, leaning on the doorframe. She has perfect white skin and her skeleton looks comfortable in its padding. Full hips, respectably manicured pubic hair, swell of breasts, inoffensive bellybutton. I remember her skin as something soft and weighted over me at some point last night. Probing fingernails, her hair in my mouth.

“Do you want to eat something?”

“Nah.”

I turn the tap off. The quiet is nestling up when I turn around and side-shuffle past doorframe girl.

Her living room is decorated. *Full-time job girl for sure.*

She comes into the living room wearing a black kimono that she looks good in. I think of all the lingerie adds that have soft edges in them. Full bodies.

I catch myself in the mirror. My hair is tangled so I throw it up in a bun. My body is angular, legs in tight black pants and a protruding shoulder-shelf coat hanger frame in a black top. The crease between my eyebrows is a permanent fault line. I take my hair down because I have a hat somewhere.

“Have you seen a hat?”

She’s looking at me, reclined on the blue, overstuffed sofa, holding Petit, who is in a state of permanent vibration.

I sympathize.

“I had a hat.”

I pull pillows off the couch and put them back.

“Petit, calm down.”

I look over and she’s cradling the dog. In this room the sunlight is piercing and she looks beautiful. Everything is sore. Her hands have these monstrous nails on them, pastel pink, *for fuck’s sake I hope she didn’t fuck me up too badly.* But that’s for later, for the shower inspection I’ll do when I get to the apartment on Berri where I’m staying. I want water everywhere.

“Can I have some water before I go?”

She puts Petit on a pillow and goes to the kitchen. I hear the tap as I continue to remove cushions. I pat Petit on the head and he whines.

She comes back with a small glass and I down it. The apartment is full of vine plants. I want to look around more but I don’t want any of this getting behind my eyelids more than it

already has.

“You know you were pretty fucked up last night.”

“I know.”

I don’t know, but I can imagine. My base state is tilted at all times.

“You fell out of a cab.”

I raise my eyebrows at the repetition. I’m not surprised I fell out of a cab, but I am that I don’t remember it. The embarrassment should have acted as a seal.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

That explains the hip pain.

“When I asked if you were okay you said you didn’t care.” She laughs when she says this, but her arms are crossed against her chest and she’s looking sideways.

“Where’s the closest metro station?”

“Prefontaine. Just walk straight out and to the left, keep going and you’ll hit it.”

I pull my jacket on. She’s back on the couch holding Petit when I’m done wrapping my scarf around my neck extra tight to make up for the lost hat.

“Petit, stop it. People have to go home at some point.”

I sympathize with Petit more. I hate it when people leave, but vibrating about it doesn’t do shit. I would tell him this, but the girl holding him already thinks I’m a homeless girl who vomits blood in bathtubs and takes tumbles out of cabs.

I sling my purse over my shoulder and open the zippers, fingers feelings for constant contents that, luckily, they find. I used to wake up like this a lot, but having lost all my things. This night’s casualty is just a hat, at least if we’re going by tangible objects.

I twist the doorknob.

“So, left and straight down?”

“Yeah.”

She’s next to me.

“Thanks for housing me.”

“No problem. Next time I’ll make breakfast.”

Quick twist left and a bye tossed backwards, I tap dance down her three steps. She’s still in the doorway and I know February is pooling around her exposed calves and I can’t for the life of me figure out why she wouldn’t just close the door instead of letting herself get cold to watch me leave.

I don’t look back.

It’s cold out. I want my hat. I find a dep. It’s closed when I get there, so I stand outside and pull the handle - more out of frustration than any real hope of entrance.

“Do you want to buy something.”

“Nah. I just enjoy pulling on locked doors. Good shoulder workout.”

The man, maybe mid-to-late twenties and Korean, crinkles his eyes at me. He’s come running out of the corner apartment across the street, pulling out a set of keys on a ring as he jaywalked without bothering to look.

“Attends. It’ouvre la porte.”

“Merci.”

I step back and look at myself in the depanneur’s windows. The lights are off inside. It’s about minus thirty and my face is blotchy, broadcasting things that are reserved for after hours and back alleys. The man unlocks the door, takes a stride inside while simultaneously flicking on

the light switch and putting the keys away, but not before he twirls them around his fingers two times.

I step up to the counter and slightly lower my too-tight scarf so I can talk.

“Tu veux des cigarettes, hein?” the man asks. He says this like it’s a well-known secret between us.

“Oui,” I answer, half gentle self-deprecation, half irritation. “Macdonald, blanc, vingt, régulier. Pas les slims.”

He pulls out the slim pack.

“Non. Pas les slims.”

I may smoke the lightest brand of cigarettes in Montreal but I don’t smoke bitch sticks.

The man furrows his brow at me.

“Like this,” I say, pulling my crushed pack out. He picks it up, inspects all six sides like it’s some type of artifact and not evidence that I chain-smoked a whole pack last night.

“Non. J’pense pas.”

“Belmont d’abord.” I can’t afford them but this interaction is taking too long and I can’t handle an inventory checklist of this man’s cancer brands.

“Kingsize?”

“Non. Régulier.”

“Vingt-cinq?”

“Sure.”

The man looks up at me again, Belmonts in hand hovering above the scanner.

“Tu viens d’où toi?”

I consider telling him I’m homeless.

“Montréal.”

“Mais ton accent. C’est pas d’ici?”

“Je viens des banlieus.” Pause. “La Rive-Sud.”

“Où ça, ‘la Rive-Sud?’”

“Brossard.”

For the love of God just scan the cigarettes.

The man smiles at me.

“Brossard.” He says this slowly, another well-known secret. “Et tu fais quoi a Montreal?”

“J’achètes des cigarettes.”

The man laughs, crinkling his eyes again. He has messy black hair and a flat oval face.

He’s wearing a blue zip-up hoodie. His teeth are rotting.

“Mais non, tu fais quoi dans la vie?”

I lie and tell him I go to university. He tells me that’s good and that I shouldn’t quit. I tell him I won’t because I always take unsolicited advice from strangers very seriously.

He laughs at this but he scans the cigarettes and puts them down in front of me and I pay.

I’m unwrapping the pack, already having crumpled the shameful receipt, when he asks,

“Des allumettes?”

“Oui. Merci.”

I make it a point to never buy lighters and usually make it through with matches or strangers who also smoke.

“Attends, j’en ai des spéciaux.”

He bends over so I can’t see him anymore and comes up with a cardboard box, the flaps cornered into each other to keep it closed. He opens the box and hands me the matches. The pack

is metallic silver, the matches themselves yellow stemmed and capped with deep blue tips. I think these matches are the nicest thing I've seen in a while.

“Prends-soin de toi.”

I don't answer because I don't know what to say; it's too early for this, but it's not actually early; I just woke up late and I want to be home. I miss the step on the way out of the *depanneur* and catch myself on the door, making the bells jingle. The man calls out to ask if I'm okay but I've already left.

I continue down the street, take a haul of the cigarette I've lit with the blue capped matches because along with my hat I also lost my lighter last night. The streets are narrow and snow-crustrusted with ice. I'm wearing stupid shoes. I was only supposed to go out dancing and now I'm making a pilgrimage back to Berri with a Columbian cold and clouded contact lenses.

I can never figure out where I am in the city. I wonder if I missed the metro in the cold then spot the familiar blue and grey downward arrow. Comfortable *katabasis*. I walk down both sets of escalators and beep through the metro gates. Green line, direction *Angrignon*.

I get on the metro and stand near the back, hand loosely holding the pole, legs spread more than hip-width apart. This is the only time I take up this much space and it is only for stability.

The metro moves. I grit my teeth against the motion.

I make it off the metro, up an escalator, a flight of stairs bisected by a metal barrier, and down a long corridor, where a man calls me a whore when I say “*désolé*” before he can get words out and I say I'm sorry because I should have let him speak even though I can't help. Another escalator. Doors that are too heavy to open easily so I have to push with my shoulder. And then I'm out.

The apartment isn't far from the metro, two blocks, but the street is long and becomes a wind tunnel in the winter. When I get to the apartment the front door is unlocked. I'm grateful because my keys don't work and I don't have the energy to finesse the front lock for ten minutes today but someone should have locked the door.

*Fucking idiots.*

I let myself into the apartment to find it abandoned and beat-up. There are cigarette butts on the carpet, cans of hard cider on the floor, at least four bottles of wine and a vodka bottle on the ground, all empty. There used to be a coffee table but it had gotten smashed one night and no one bothered to replace it. There was just stuff everywhere.

Someone has left an entirely soaked-through paper towel roll on the couch and when I pick it up liquid squelches through my fingers. I make a mental note to ask what happened when my roommates get back. There's an ashtray flipped over onto the mattress on the floor next to the couch and a half-smoked joint that left has a burn mark on the stripped fitted sheet next to it.

*Could have started a fire,* I mumble, then catch myself because I don't want to be my mother. I pick up the joint and light it with the matches because I'm still wearing my jacket. I find a half-full glass and take a gulp. I realize it's vodka. I think *fuck it* and down the rest of it.

I don't actually live in this apartment. I'm subletting it from a girl, H., one of my current roommates, is friends with, who's from Vermont and makes terrible splatter-art. The canvases are littered all over the apartment, too bad to even be termed "bad Pollock."

I haul on the joint. H. and I are both from Brossard and jumped at the opportunity to live in the city. The apartment had two bedrooms that were both going to be empty until July, one because the girl was off in Colorado teaching skiing and failing her degree at McGill, the other because the guy who lived there had been deported back to Pakistan.



A month after H. and I had moved in, the roommate who had been deported showed up with a new visa. His name was BP. I affectionately referred to him as British Petrol since his arrival back at the apartment was nothing short of a disaster. The first day I met oil-spill boy he called me a narcissist and asked me about my relationship with my father.

There are no clean towels in the linen closet so I go into the room H. and I share and pick one off the floor. When H. brings home daddies from Grindr, I couch surf. He tells me he can do the same for me, but if I have anyone over, they never spend the night.

H.'s clothes are scattered everywhere. They are all nicer than my own. I drop my purse on the bed. I strip my jacket off and throw it over the purse, mindful to zip the pockets up first.

I take a towel to the bathroom, shaking it out as I move the three steps down the hall and through the bathroom door. I shut the door and lock it. There's no one home. I peel out of my clothes and leave them in a heap on the floor. I turn the shower on, reaching my hand under the faucet, but the water jets out of the showerhead instead and sprays me in the face. I stumble forward, wiping at the wet but stepping into the stream so that I'll get water everywhere.

It's cold. I know it'll heat up in a minute so I force myself to stand there. Besides, it's only nice girls who get refreshing showers with clean towels. This is only about washing. The water slowly gets warmer. I pull my hands through my hair, rub my palms into the soft parts of my face, around my eyes, gentle circular motions.

We're out of soap.

I turn around so that the water can run down my back. I look down and notice the dark purple spot on my hip.

It's hard to bruise a hip and I think *I thought I was smarter than this*. I can use shampoo as soap so I pile it into my hands, raking my nails over my back. The water is still not hot

enough. I don't adjust it.

I run shampoo through my hair and scrub my scalp. I can feel suds washing over my face, stinging my eyes. I open them and see the bathtub is filthy. *How are you supposed to get clean in a dirty shower?* There are small black pubic hairs stuck to the back edges, scum on the beige porcelain between my toes, the nails painted red in an attempt to care about myself because I once read something about self-care and became desperate enough to try it.

My toes are painted red and they look horrible and I remember the girl's plastic pastel nails and I remember them digging into my thighs and I see the plum mark on my hip and feel it throb and I feel myself to see what the pastel nails did, and I feel and feel, fingers probing inside, clinical, taking inventory and coming out okay but someone's been in there I know and I can't feel anything wrong but that's what's wrong and then I remember last night, drunk because I was upset and then upset that I was still upset after getting drunk so I drank more and then took acid because there's always someplace deeper you can crawl in to and I remember leaving to go dancing and thinking I may not make it back and not knowing if I meant this half-way house, which isn't so bad considering I used to live in a garage for a time for fuck's sake, or in general but not caring and being afraid that I didn't care and then we got there and we drank more and I asked the girl if she was into girls because I had enough friends and she laughed and I didn't even say hello or ask her name and it wasn't because I was being confident like I think she thought I was but because I genuinely didn't care about her as a person.

She was just a person and I didn't want to go home and she didn't seem so bad and most of the time it doesn't matter either way, things are inconsequential and maybe she would be nice and I wanted to be numb and the alcohol and acid weren't doing shit or maybe they were but I wanted self-destruction, I wanted Chernobyl in a bathroom stall and I remember doing bumps off

her nails and her undoing my pants and going down on me and seeing myself from the corner of the ceiling in the bathroom and thinking I looked so small. I tangle my hands in her hair because I don't want to be there but I am and I want to feel something. Someone bangs on the stall door and she comes up for air while I button my pants and the bouncer shoos us out but laughs and yells *hot shit* at us and I watch myself leave the bathroom all intertwined with this girl because I don't want to stand up anymore, I want to stop it, stop the motion but she says we'll get a cab so we get a cab and my friends are calling and I'm wearing my jacket but I thought my hat was in my jacket sleeve and the girl's hands are down my pants and she's rubbing my clit and the cab driver is playing this EDM bullshit from the radio and this girl's tongue is on my neck and all I can think is *are you happy now are you are you happy you're going to a home you've always wanted a home* and I'm still motion sick and when the cab stops I fall out and vomit into a sewer because of serendipity and I'm still watching myself, tethered to the antenna of the cab, floating like a helium balloon and I think *oh dear that's not good* and the girl asks if I'm okay and the girl on the ground answers *I don't care* and the girl tethered to the car thinks that gutter girl isn't going to make it and that *this is terribly sad* and I make the water stop even though there is something still stinging my eyes and I wrap the towel around myself like a blanket.

## Entering the Whirlpool

Above the overflow camping parking lot for Lake Louise, someone is playing with the lights. The clouds brighten in dark bands, then back off again. I'm walking to the bathroom—four walls over a hole in a campground parking lot in the middle of Alberta—and I wonder if I've finally come undone. The sky pitches itself on and off. Have you ever looked at the clouds? And I don't mean in this meandering *what are the clouds? oh geeze, isn't this whole thing like a Turner painting* kind of way, but looked at them and seen that they weren't really touching at all, that there is so much space up there and that there are varying levels, it's not all flat, you just couldn't see it from that perspective. And another strip near the treeline goes off and there's a man walking in front of me to the bathroom too, I'm guessing, and I want to ask *are you seeing this?* but I don't. I talk too much. I watch the clouds.

It's 11 pm and it's dark but light enough to still see without a flashlight. The sky turns on again. I'm walking looking up, and if I don't blink I can see this swirling in the clouds like it's all filament, but if I blink it stops, so I don't blink, I keep my eyes right open and the filaments swirl and it hurts and seems to open up into itself and I can't tell if it's coming towards me, the swirling filaments like a whirlpool made of material you can only kind of see, or pulling away and if that's what's been playing with the sky and I don't blink and it's coming towards me and if it's really what's responsible, not for the sky, well not just the sky, then I'd like it to come towards me, to suction me right up there in the clouds with it because maybe that's home and I blink and it's gone.

The lights shift off on the left, farther behind a big cloud near Mount Victoria. I ask the vortex to give me a sign and more lights come on but I know the sky has been flickering for at least seven minutes and, if I'm going to be rational, the probability that my plea for a sign will

coincide with the sky darkening and brightening is so high but I'm talking rational pseudo-nothing. I need my flashlight in the bathroom and so I ask, really ask, whatever is playing with the lights to play with my light and I sit and wait and give it time because this one's a little trickier, it works on batteries, and I don't know how any of this works. Nothing happens so I turn the flashlight off. There's no need. From the other side of the wall a man laughs once, guttural, loud. The dividing wall does not go to the top of the ceiling so I can see it is dark in there.

When I go back outside, the sky is still shuttering and someone is taking pictures but they're only taking pictures of the camp ground, of the parking lot, and at first this makes me sad because there's this whole beautiful light show and then I realize it probably wouldn't show up in the pictures, then I realize I don't know if it shows up even to him.

I hear my hiking shoes scrape gravel as I spot the RV parked near the back of the lot and make my way towards it, mindful to take breaks from looking up in case a car misses my outline in the early dusk. I sit back in my camping chair behind the RV, put my feet up on a concrete block used to stop cars from barreling into the forest. I squint at the trees. The clouds above them darken and as I open my book, it starts to rain. It is quiet and the clouds have stopped shuttering. I do not know if it is good knowing that everything eventually stops.

### *Room Interlude*

I met Tatijana my first day of work, which was the day after I had applied to work at the massage parlor. I had been in a bed in Brossard with the lights off trawling on Craigslist's back pages looking for a job when I saw an ad for an upscale parlor in downtown Montreal. I needed money and as I fucked a lot of people anyway, so I figured I might as well monetize it. I sent an email with two photos and my CV from a fake account and got a reply within half an hour.

This was not my first option, of course, but after being kicked out of my parent's place so often and having no money to speak of, I was out of options. I was ready to start my adult life and if that meant being a whore, then so be it. It was better than scrounging for shifts at the Poverty Barn to sell entitled rich assholes carpets. My original plan had been to sell my eggs to a woman named Jessica, also found on the back pages, but she had to go back to China for a family emergency and I lost my nerve after that. She kept telling me how selfless I was, but the truth was I just needed \$5000 to be able to move out and not have an anxiety attack when I looked at my chequing account. Although I was certain I never wanted kids, and therefore selling my eggs was really some heightened version of selling my plasma, I felt weird that I could potentially have a kid growing up in the city. So I decided to sell a different part of my body instead.

The parlor was in an old stone building on Rene-Lévesque that also housed a photocopy store and a medical clinic. There were no signs out front, no advertising. When I rang the bell, a buzzer went off and I walked into a mahogany paneled room with a thin tall man standing behind a desk where a dark-haired woman was sitting.

"Hello, I'm Alex," the man said in a thick Russian accent.

"Hello, I am also Alex," the woman said in a more subtle Russian accent.

I wanted to say I was also Alex, but instead made as if I was going to shake their hands.

“Turn around please.”

I looked at him. His nose was thin and long, bisecting a pale face that was all angles and smooth skin. I pivoted on my left foot. Alex and Alex looked at each other, muttered a few ‘da’s’ and nodded.

“Very good. And you’re how old?”

I replied

“Okay, we’ll say 18. Better for customers. You look young. You look fit. You do gymnastics?”

“I was a figure skater,” I replied numbly. I felt outside of my body.

“Beautiful. You know what we do here?” tall Alex asked.

I was silent. I nodded.

“Yes well, you’ll fit in very well. We are a very upscale agency. No one off the street, all recommendations. We have hockey players, politicians, business men, all very good people. You can work long hours?”

I said I could.

“Beautiful. Alex, here, will take the phone calls. She schedules. Come back tomorrow, 10 am. Please to wear street clothes, you change here in the room with the girls. Bring cute dresses. Sexy. Do something with your hair, please. Bring condoms. Never linger around the door. We have cameras everywhere, we will know when you come.”

“Okay.”

And with that I was hired. It was the easiest job interview I had ever had. When I came back the next day I had a backpack full of dresses and had straightened my hair. Tall Alex was

not there, but Alex shooed me into a room with five other girls. When I opened the door they all looked at me from where they had been either lounging or applying makeup.

“Girls. This is Anastasia, she’s new,” Alex said, and with a light shove, she went back to her desk.

Anick was the first to get up and hug me. She was in a sequined mini-dress and wore six-inch stilettos heels and moved with the assuredness of a go-go dancer. The other girls were kind, saying hello before going back to getting ready for the day.

“Tu parles français?” she asked.

“Oui,” I replied, holding onto my backpack like a baby.

“Parfait ça! Ben, prépares-toi, tout le temps des grosses journées et il faut être prêt si non Alex va nous battre,” she laughed, but the two girls sitting at the table next to the boarded up window whispered something in Russian. “Ben non, il ne nous bats pas, il est juste un peu cave, c’est tout. Ne t’en fais pas avec lui, c’est sûr que ça va bien aller. Tu as déjà fait ce sorte de travail?”

“Non.”

“A child,” one of the girls at the table said before getting up. “I’m Tatijana.” She was easily six-foot-tall in her bare feet with golden hair and piercing blue eyes. “You will be fine. Don’t let them push you around. I’m going for a cigarette,” she said before opening the door exiting.

“Tati, save one for me!” shouted Anick in her thick Quebecoise accent. “Elle, je l’aime. Pis as-tu vu ses seins? Mon dieux, j’aurai du allez faire les miens au Russie, tabarnaque,” she said, squeezing her own tits and looking down at them.

“Did you bring clothes?” asked a girl who had been sitting on the far back couch. “I’m



Sun. It's a stupid name. Alex picks them," she said with an eye roll. "Fucking idiot." The other girls laughed. I took my dresses out of my backpack and they stared at me.

"Well, put them on," Sun said. For a split second I wondered if I should go to the bathroom to change but I realized this was a ridiculous idea. I stripped in front of them.

"Mon dieux, beau p'tit corps, hein?" said Anick.

The girls didn't like any of the dresses I did and picked a plain black body-hugging dress and gave me a pair of heels from the shared box after insisting mine were too short. Anick helped me do my makeup while I sat on the couch and Sun brushed my hair.

"Okay so, first things first. Never let them touch you with their penis if it doesn't have a condom. They'll say they'll pay you more or whatever, but it just fucks with the rest of us because then they think they can do whatever they want."

"Pis ils pensent déjà ça!" replied Anick, stopping her laborious application of eyeshadow onto my right eye.

"Also, it might be weird the first few times, but it's not so bad. Don't tell them personal stuff. Just lie. Always smile. Drag the massage part out for as long as you can. Never drink when they offer you something. Alex is so stupid, he lets them buy expensive bottles of champagne and vodka and some girls drink it but, personally, I don't need to be drunk with these assholes. I've got friends for that."

I tried to nod but Anick immobilized my face in her hands.

"Parlent leur beaucoup. Faut les flatter, faut les faire penser qu'on leur aiment, blah blah," said Anick, and I felt her breath on my face.

"Oh yes, oh god, oh yes yes yes yes," Sun was screaming before bursting into laughter. "Just scream, they think you're having a great time and then they finish faster. But make sure

they come near the end of the hour or else they want it again and it's too much work.''

'Tu fais attention à Nihlo, il prend des Viagra comme des bonbons pis sa queue est tout l'temps bandé, vieux sale,' added Anick. 'But, he pays well and he's pretty slow. C'est un bonus.'

When Anick was done she shuffled me into the corner that housed a large mirror and shelves full of makeup and an extra dresser.

'Ben, t'es prête. Tu vas voir, c'est ben correcte.'

Alex walked back into the room.

'Anastasia, client downstairs. Second door.'

'You'll need to bring two towels and an extra bedsheet. Strip the table after you're done and shower. They usually want to shower with you but get paid first and then decide if you want them touching you more,' said Sun, pointing to the shelves with rows of folded white material.

When I came back from my first appointment, only Tatijana was in the room, reading a book at the table and eating her lunch.

'How was it?' she asked, not looking up.

'It was okay, I guess. He was weird.'

Tatijana looked up.

'Do you think regular men need to come into this building at 11 am on a Tuesday to have sex with women they keep in a backroom?' She looked down and flipped a page.

I threw the dirty towels in the hamper and took off my heels. I could see myself in the mirror, wearing more makeup than I had at any gala show in all my years of skating, my hair straightened out to my lower back, tucked behind my ears, arms folded across middle.

“Do you know what you do when you get home this Friday?”

“Get drunk?”

“No. You take all the money you made this week. You lay it on your bed. Then you lie in it,” she said flatly, flipping another page.

## Six Days After the Solstice and Still No Sun

I dug a hole in the dirt for my feet. I used a branch sticking out of the dead leaves, snapped it so that it was smaller, and scratched at the earth. The ground in the forest is damp, so I scratch and dirt comes away in black clumps.

I interest the mosquitos, I swat at them, but I'm in their home and I'm alive so I don't kill any of them. I move the stick back and forth, ripping grooves into the earth. I swat a mosquito hovering near my face. It's cool beneath the trees but I'm beginning to sweat.

I never plan anything. I'm wearing skin-tight pants and a borrowed t-shirt, both black. I stop to tie my hair up but it still falls in my face when I bend over, and I can't tell if it's mosquitos. I swat more, streaking mud on my face. I use the stick to pry a rock out of the soil. The hole is growing. I grab the rock and hack at the sides of the hole, crumbling the small cliffs of earth, and then push the loose dirt backwards and out through my legs. It gets in my shoes.

I break roots. The path I've found off the Mountain View section of the Mont Royal cemetery looks forgotten, but there's a hideaway built out of fallen branches, so maybe I'm in someone's home.

There are so many live things in the dirt. I see a long white tubeworm, immobile, and for half a minute I think, *fuck this, I'm not putting my feet in there*, but then I remember why I'm here. I push the tubeworm with the rock. It rolls, stiff. The hole is getting bigger but it's still not big enough and I've already started and I don't think I'll ever do this again so I keep digging.

I dig with my hands. I feel dirt under my fingernails and I swat at mosquitos and push hair out of my eyes with the back of my wrists.

I'm alone on a Wednesday by a dirt path spliced through a cemetery in the middle of Montreal, skipping work, digging a hole with my hands. I'm worried this is the beginning of a slow spiral into psychosis. I'm doing this at 10 am and praying for it to work. A last ditch effort.

If I was smart, I would have my meltdowns on weekends.

My hands are clotted with dirt so I pat them until they are cleaner. I take my shoe off, balance while I remove my sock, place it in the shoe. I do it again with the other foot. I put the shoes on a stump. I put my feet in the earth. I press them into the hole, twisting side to side. I feel my toes soft against the damp soil. I rake dirt all around my feet. I remember that insects are a part of the forest, and there are worse things that can touch skin.

But there are a hundred mosquitos, and on a distant hill I can see the heavy machinery gouging graves for the dead and I understand that it's very ironic to go to a cemetery in an attempt to stave off the thoughts of killing yourself, but I just don't give a shit.

The trees are slanted on a downward slope facing decay. I tell myself if I wanted this to be enough, it could be. The morning is quiet except for the nuclear hum of the sun.

### *Room Interlude*

When I come back into the room, Anick is sitting on one of the couches painting her toenails and Sun is sitting in the splits on the floor.

“Hey, ma belle. Ça bien été?” asks Anick, looking up from her handiwork, the tip of the brush poised above the big toe on her left foot.

“Bof. Tu sais, même que d’habitude. Pas trop pire,” I reply, throwing the dirty sheets and towels into a laundry hamper in the corner of the room before kicking the door closed with my foot.

“T’avais qui?”

“That annoying older dude, Jean? Je ne sais pas, comment tu vas être tellement typique que tu t’appelles Jean et que tu me parles de ta femme et ton chalet à St-Remi pendant que tu visites des prostitués. J’comprends mal.”

Both girls let out a peel of laughter.

“Il n’est pas trop pire, Jean. Juste un peu cave mais il tip bien.”

“Ben oui, un extra 40\$ pour que j’lui dit comment qu’il est beau pendant qu’il me fourre. Super,” I say before sitting myself down on the couch next to Anick, who puts her nail polish away and looks at me.

“Ben, ça pourrait être pire. “

“I know. But that’s still not great.’ I play with my hair as I look at the boarded-up window across the room from us.

“I saw him once. He kept going on about how ‘exotic’ I was,” says Sun, now on her back with her legs in the air and split open.

“Toi là, tu vas voler toute mes clients avec tes acrobatiques, “ says Anick, half-joking,

half-pouting.

“Anick, if I don’t do something in this room, I lose it. You paint your nails, I stretch. Besides, everyone knows I’m the ‘cute Asian spinner.’ You’re the ‘hot Quebec milf.’ I have my market, you have yours,” Sun says, hands on her thighs pushing them further towards the floor.

She’s also joking, of course, but that’s only the surface level.

“Ana, there’s something on your dress,” Anick says, moving my body in front of her and running her hands down the material.

I get up and look down, let out a loud groan when I see the mess on the front of the only dress I ever wear when I’m working.

“Fucking idiots,” says Sun, closing her legs and turning onto her stomach for a quad stretch. “I’ve got some other dress on the shelf there. Third one,” she says, grasping her right foot with her arm stretched out behind her and pulling in.

I strip out of my dress and head towards the shelves, mindful of where Sun is on the floor.

“Ana, not to be comme ta mère, mais ça va? Tu es toute mince,”

I look down. Since starting work 4 months ago, I had lost a lot of weight. I had attributed it to the nightly drinking binges and weekend drug benders, but I didn’t remember the last time I had had a full meal or slept without nightmares. When I had started working at the parlor, I joked that I could now afford to buy a sandwich whenever I wanted without feeling guilty. The girls had laughed. Sandwiches had switched to beer had switched to hard alcohol and then hard alcohol and coke and Ms. The girl I was seeing, and who thought we were dating, was happily oblivious to my day job, thinking I went off to a call center every morning when she left my apartment to go to her job as a day camp monitor. I bought us shots every time we went out

drinking, paid her cover at shows when she was low on money. I resented her for being so oblivious, for being from Westmount and having the safety net of her father if her cash flow got too negative. But I also liked her and, on the rare nights she wasn't there, I couldn't fall asleep in the apartment. The one time I had complained about her to Anick, she had asked if I wanted to have a threesome together to make more money in our one-hour appointments. She said we could just ignore the guy and not have to do any work. *Plein d'argent pour une heure de travail*' she had winked. I declined out of a sense of morality that I had no business having.

In the mirror, I can see my tits are gone and my thighs have shrunk to the point where my knees look knobbly. I move over to the shelves and pull a dress over my head.

“Well, at least you don't have to worry about me stretching out your dresses, Sun.”

“Sun pèse trois livres, t'inquiètes,” says Anick. She's stopped painting her nails again and looks at me with big eyes rimed with gold eyeliner. “Tu sais, Ana. Moi j'avais beaucoup de difficulté quand j'ai commencé mais ça passe.”

“How long did that take?” I ask, turning from the mirror.

“Quelques mois, mais maintenant si j'en ai vu une queue j'en ai vu mille pis c'est du travail comme d'autre chose. Au début, c'est quelque chose, c'était pas la vie que je voulais pour moi, je m'avais jamais imaginer faire ça, ben non bon dieux, mais mon mari est parti et j'ai mes deux kids. J'ai pas fini mon cegep, j'étais supposer faire quoi? Ici au moins sont propre, sont respectueux pas mal, oui, tu tombes sur un idiot ou un clochard de temps en temps mais j'peux payer pour que mes p'tits gars vont à l'école priver et on passe des *belles* vacances ensemble. L'année passer on est allé à Disneyworld, ils ont capoté, pis c'est moi qui payé pour ça. Il n'y a personne d'autre. Si mon gars a besoin d'un nouveau back pack, je l'achète, c'est tout, pis on peut encore manger. Le pire moment était quand ma sœur a su ce que je fais, elle a braillé, merde



elle *pleurait*, elle disait que je lui avais fait *mal*, imagine, imagine que c'est elle qui pleure, qui se désespère pour moi comme si elle pouvait comprendre, comme c'était elle qui était la pute, qui passait la journée longue a sucé des queues et faire la folle sur le dos avec les jambes dans les air. Oui, elle a pleuré, elle disait que je ne me respectais pas, que c'était la fin du monde. Il m'a fallu toute ma force pour pas là criez dessous, comme si j'avais besoin que ma sœur, ma propre famille, perde la tête. Eh ben, je suis supposé de quitter? Qui va payer l'école? Qui va payer les vacances et les activités après l'école et les leçons de musique, les cadeaux, le linge, l'hydro, la maison, *qui va payer la maison*. C'est pas ma sœur, j'peux te dire ça. C'est moi. Je lui ai fait jurer de rien dire, à jamais. J'fais pas tout ça pour que mes enfants savent que leur mère c'est un prostitué, j'ai trop fait de sacrifices pour que quelque vient et gâche mon travail. C'était dur, ben oui. J'étais un peu déchiré mais on fait ce qu'on peut. J'le regrette pas. J'aime mes gars. Je suis une bonne mère. Je leur donne ce que je n'avais jamais : des opportunités. Une chance je n'ai pas eu de filles, ça m'aurai casser.”

“Anick, you're a liar. T'es juste une pute qui aime ca se faire fourrer,” says Sun, her voice muffled from being folded in a child's pose.

“Ben, y a ca aussi, mais c'est moins dramatique,” laughs Anick before continuing to paint her nails.

## You Don't Have To Go Home, But You Can't Stay Here

I listen to talk radio. The voices, somewhat incoherent, are therapeutic, if not filtered through a fifteen-minute interval of traffic updates. I don't think anyone other than depressed people listen to talk radio. It's all chatter. At eleven pm, the talk radio station plays the CTV National news. The shit they say is ridiculous.

While sitting in the bath at eleven twenty-two p.m., this time actually taking a bath, not curled up, fully clothed, trying to get a grip, white-knuckling porcelain and dry heaving between my legs, the CTV news anchor introduces a clip of people crying and blathering into microphones, quick snippets, after the shooting, blatting through an analog radio in my parents old house. It has police sirens for background noise, fading in and out with the voices. I can see the flicker of red and blue lights projected on the wall, circulating and oscillating in and out of view. The voices say the regular things: first hand accounts, repetition, stammering, blanketed disbelief. One woman says, "No. I don't know. I wasn't there." It sounds like she is running. I wonder if the reporter has a wireless microphone so he can run her down.

The voices are echoing off the tile turned grit-coloured in certain spots. I decide I have had enough of the talk radio, for now. My hand is all wet and covered in soap suds as I jam my thumb into the negative symbol on the speaker, repeatedly, until it's quiet. The water reflects off the bath in ripples, distinct wet noises reverberating in the small space. The CTV news parade is finally off. I wonder who authorizes these things. When did everything turn into a horror show of fetishizing pain?

The same way the radio isn't real is the same way I believe most things aren't real.

"Dissociative states are not uncommon in sustained depressive episodes." They make a pill for that.

They make a pill for everything.

I filled the prescription. They were free. The pharmacist asked me how I was as he handed me sixty pills of combined antidepressant and anxiolytic medication. I said I was doing “pretty good.” He smiled. I didn’t hear anything he told me about the pills. Something about sleep. I stuffed the two containers into my backpack and saw that they had twelve renewals on them. It seemed ill-advised.

I looked at them for a long time. Mirtazapine. 12. Take ½ to 1 tablet once daily at bedtime as directed by your doctor. All caps glaring. My full name snaking around the small paper.

Unlike SSRI’s, the most common type of antidepressant, NaSSa’s work differently on the brain. I would explain how they work, but I don’t really know. Neither does the Science Man. We have a vague idea only. The main side effects are “weight gain” and “drowsiness.” Weight gain means you start eating sugar straight out of the bag at twelve a.m. after you’ve taken the pill. Drowsiness means you’ll sleep for sixteen hours and still feel like you’re watching life through a fishbowl when you manage to claw yourself out of bed. Mirtazapine is a sedative. I am a good candidate for daily sedation.

I think my doctor knows this. Or, she realizes that I’m underweight and have insomnia, which Mirtazapine fits quite well. My doctor is my sister’s friend from pre-med and when I cry in her office she always hands me a tissue and looks at me with sad eyes that squint and make her looked pained. I think it’s a form of mimesis.

When I told her I almost burnt down my parent’s house because I left food on the stove and fell asleep, for once, and woke up with seven firemen in the kitchen/bedroom/living room, she asked me if it might have been on purpose. I answered that I didn’t know. She said, “let’s

try,” handed me a tissue, printed up the prescription.

The tissues at the Jewish General Hospital are see-through.

In my bathroom, I can see myself in the mirror. I’m looking at myself how Dr. Vriniotis looks at me. I am a pity party of one. I am told this is a dissociative state. I think this is absurd, because if I could disassociate properly I wouldn’t associate with myself at all. But I’m stuck. Mirror Me looks sad. I feel bad for her.

When Mirror Me takes the pill, I am vaguely aware of it in my mouth. Sedation is the answer to disassociation the same way moving back into your parents’ house is the answer to ending up flat broke after you’ve only been moved out for a year. It solves the problem, but you lose a lot. I think Mirror Me took the pill because she knew we were losing either way. I live in the house my parents abandoned because it was condemned in order to build the new bridge.

Falling asleep is a snap screen black and then it’s morning.

The first day feels like nothing. Not in the way that it didn’t feel like anything or it didn’t happen. It feels like a vacation. I’m aware I’m there, but I don’t mind. At home I stare at my phone screen for twenty minutes. I feel nothing. I understand what I’ve been doing, and that this is supposed to be vaguely concerning, but I can’t be concerned. I listen to talk radio. There are ads that I don’t bother to mute.

I eat. I haven’t been hungry in four months but today I can entertain the possibility of food. It’s nine p.m.. I’m usually up until four am. I take a pill. Snap black. Morning.

I tell my friend it’s like being legally high. I take a bus. I float around the city, the other pedestrians pleasant rather than gnawing. My walks feel as if I’m on a parade float. Door locked, Mirror Me looks fine. Nothing else.

And this is the problem that is not the problem. Because now I can’t feel. I know I should

feel vaguely sad about things, but I don't. Most people think this is normal, that this is good, but it's not. I don't know how to exist if I don't feel anything. And yes, sure, I understand I should try and replace the negative emotions with positive emotions, but positive emotions are stupid and for people who believe in self-care and karma and crystals. And as I'm writing this, I can only vaguely get mad at the self-care, karma, crystal people because I'm in an aquarium, suspended in silicon gel and fine with it.

When I first realized I couldn't feel anything, I was sitting on a borrowed couch and I wanted to cry but I couldn't. That made me want to cry more. And my chest felt hot and I could vaguely remember what crying felt like, all hot eyes and wet and ugly, but I still couldn't and that made me more sad because I've been crying for twenty-four years and now there's nothing. And this should make me upset, but it doesn't.

I considered taking an Ativan, but I can't even have panic attacks anymore so all it will do is reinforce the glass walls.

When the person who owns the couch couldn't see me on the balcony anymore, they thought I had jumped off. I've been talking about it for a while. Not in any serious way, just vaguely. I was sitting on the balcony floor instead of a chair, writing this, maybe some last-ditch effort to feel something, even if it's just discomfort. Nothing. I found the right position. After this exclamation, I told her "not today." She wandered back to the kitchen but her voice trailed out the window screen: "How bad was the writing?" A vague laughter.

I booked a one-way ticket to Calgary and looked for mountains from the balcony. All I could see was Mont Royal.

## Burial of the Dead

The first day I stand behind the massage table because it is the only piece of furniture in the room. I want something between me and the door. Everything is red. I am wearing black peep-toed high heels and I can feel the semi-circle of faux leather biting into the flesh around my toes as my heels slide down in discomfort. In time, I forget they are uncomfortable like I forget them like most things that hurt.

There are too many mirrors. It's April.

Brossard is only a week behind me. The setting has changed.

I don't know what to do with my hands. I'm wearing a tight black dress that I had bought at *Forever 21* thinking it was a shirt. I brought four dresses with me this morning and the other girls had me try them all on to help me pick which one looked best. I peeled out of the dresses, one after another, completely naked for five seconds in front of a semi-circle of women. I was not self-conscious. They are used to skin.

In the room, I cross my legs at the ankle and place my hands on the massage table. The material is thick and synthetic. The carpet is dark, and my heels sink into the ground. If I shift my weight too much I'll topple.

I've straightened my hair. It goes almost to my lower back and I tuck all of it behind my ears even though I hate how it looks when I do that.

I don't care how I look for whomever I'm expecting. I didn't brush my teeth this morning. I had a smoke before I came in. I run my tongue over my teeth. I didn't wear lipstick, but my eyes are done up. Another girl did my eyeliner. My hands have never been steady enough. She made a joke about instability that made the other girls laugh. I can feel myself sucking my stomach in. I only contain liquids at this point. I was told to bring two towels and an

extra sheet with me.

There is a glass shower in the corner of the room. It has a single, unlabeled bottle in it full of some off-brand body wash.

I'm inside the ground, down a flight of stone steps and a crooked hallway. The lights are dim. There is a sink with a mirror over it across the room with a beige bottle of lotion on it. There are shelves: three shelves above each other going up the wall next to the shower. There's a clock on one shelf with a bottle of massage oil next to it. The other shelves have extra towels. A tissue box.

The tissues are paper thin.

I smooth my palms on the massage table. It's heavily padded and makes a rubber squelching sound in what I can only assume is resistance to skin being dragged across it.

I feel small. I wonder what my parents would think if they could see me. I wonder if all my deceased relatives are watching from the ceiling. I don't think I believe in an afterlife, but right now I feel the weight of a million eyes bearing down on me. The only ones I'm acutely aware of are my grandmother's. I feel smaller. I narrate an apology in my head in case she is listening.

Apologies without direct, immediate actions are empty and I'm worried she can read my thoughts so I feel worse. I compact it down.

My ankles are still crossed. I shift my weight from hip to hip, trying to leverage against the pain building in the balls of my feet. The door handle makes a noise. I set my face.

The man who comes in is wearing a jacket and dark pants. He busies himself with entering the door while I make sure my face is a beacon of hospitality. I take my hands off the massage table. I clasp them behind my back. I feel the word "hi" lodged in the back of my throat.

I don't know what I'm doing.

The clock says 12:01.

I came in at 11:30.

I hear the door click locked. I wonder if that is common practice. Of course, the people in charge know we are in here and I can't possibly imagine a scenario were anyone would walk through a closed door in this place. I feel animal insecurity. I wonder how long it will take me to untwist the lock and run away if I have to. I don't like the idea of an added three seconds. Maybe five if my fingers are clumsy.

The man is facing me.

"Hi."

"Hello."

He is short. My height. He's removing his jacket, immobile, in the doorway. His eyes are wide open.

My face is frozen in hospitality smile. I feel myself expel air in some type of vocalization.

The man throws his jacket in the corner of the room.

"Hello. Anastasia. That's a pretty name."

"Thank you."

We are both aware that this is not my real name and saying thank you feels wrong. But feelings here are meant only to be brushed away.

I hear the man's sneakers whisper against the carpet without realizing that he is moving behind me. I feel hands on my shoulders, squeezing into the black dress material before lifting upwards and sliding down my arms. His hands hold my hands that have ended up back on the



massage table. I didn't feel them leave my back.

The hands give a gentle squeeze on the top of my wrists. I think this is supposed to be reassuring. I have bird bones. He squeezes too hard.

I know I should turn around and smile seductively, maybe hold his face with the soft part of my palm, but instead I feel my shoulders rise up in tandem with a head shake and I side-step right until I've cleared his body. I shake my wrists loose. I smooth the front of my dress.

My heels have stepped into the floor and I feel them slice lateral lines in the carpet. It sounds like ripping.

When I half-turn, the man is smiling and looking at me. His face is okay. He's maybe in his early forties and a tiny bit heavy-set. His clothes look like nothing. I still have that stupid smile pressed into my face.

I want to cry. Maybe scream. Hit him. All I do is half-hold my right arm across my middle, my hand clasped into my left forearm. I didn't paint my nails and my hands are white, the knuckles furious.

The man is unbuttoning his shirt. He's been talking since before but I wasn't tuned in.

"... and the weather we're having, so unseasonable. Are you from Montreal?"

"Yes."

"Where from?"

I'm not from Montreal. I'm from the suburbs. La Rive Sud. I took two buses and changed lines in the metro twice before walking here. The building is on Rene-Levesque. I crossed Needle Park with my head down and headphones in, the sound turned up to maximum. I'm not worried about collateral tissue damage anymore.

I lie. I say I'm from Verdun. He nods in understanding. I understand that he is an idiot

because people only ever move to Verdun, they are never from there.

His shirt is completely open.

“You are just gorgeous.”

The same hospitality smile is baked onto my face and I pull the corners a little tighter, a little wider, in what I hope is feigned embarrassment and acceptance. I feel my eyebrows shoot up.

“Thank you.”

After I say this I bite my tongue. My eyelids shutter. I unclamp. Twist my tongue in the confines of my mouth. I say a small apology to my tongue. It is not its fault. I crimp my fingers into my forearm.

The man still has his shirt open and is on the side of the table where I was. I’m at the top. We look like we are having a diplomatic conversation.

He hooks his hands into the top part of his sleeves where the fabric meets his shoulders and he shimmies out of it with his thumbs.

It falls onto the floor and he throws it onto his jacket. It makes a noise.

The man is now shirtless. He has chest hair and small, dark nipples. He has a pot belly. His neck is short. There is a disconnect between his torso and his head.

His lips are moving.

“...worry, I know all about this.”

Another corner lip pull. I’m all teeth. I’m still not threatening. I make a wide gesture with my arms, my fingers spread apart so that the webbing between them is pulled taught. I gesture to the table. The man lies down and his face is hidden. I kick off the heels. They make a sound. I regret this because now my soles are touching the carpeted and I know it’s never been cleaned.

I am supposed to massage the man.

I shuffle to the shelf with the oil bottle on it. I bring it closer to the table. In time, again, I will learn to do these things more quietly. Inconspicuous and hidden. But today I am all wrong.

I still feel eyes.

I squirt the bottle's contents into my hands and it makes a mess. I cup my hands and place them over the man's back. He jumps. Tells me the liquid is cold. His voice is laughing. He finds me funny.

I have visions of putting him in a choke hold and holding fast until there is no laugh left in the room.

I rub my palms on his back. I spread the oil. His back is uneven and the skin is thick. He has little moles everywhere. Some have hairs.

I look at the red wall. I kneed his tissue. I'm sure he is still talking.

My tight smile is useless since his head is in the massage table. I feel myself bubbling up small air expirations pushed through my voice box in what I hope is a candid and pleasant manner. I hate myself for being so accommodating.

I push my hands into his skin. It folds in on itself in rolls that I make an effort to smooth out.

*First the shoulders.* When I was on the national team for figure skating, massage and stretching were part of our daily exercise. I have nimble fingers. I can feel all the knots. He has none. His back muscles are like pudding, too soft and uncomfortably warm.

*Massage the upper portion. This is where tension is kept. Smooth the thumbs into the creases caused by a neck planted into a torso. The soft parts on the sides of the neck. The tissue around the shoulder blades uncovered by bone. Here, you make small pressing motions with the*

*fingers. You press into the skin like playing piano keys. You can tell a virtuoso piano player by “la doighté:” how they finger and play the keys. There are different timbres.*

I try to be gentle, not because I’m worried about hurting the man but because I do not know how much pressure to enact to assure that I am present, but invisible.

He is still talking.

*Next move to the middle of the back. The spine is crucial, but fragile. You must never press directly on it. Next to it is best. Slow upwards motion, as if attempting to separate the muscles from the underlying bone structure. Upwards, and then down. With varying pressures. A delicate symphony of movement.* I know the man is not an athlete and he will not have the same pressure points. But even though I am inexperienced at this, I know enough about bodies, all the people they encapsulate, to know that everyone is in pain. The degrees are all that differ.

He’s begun talking about the construction.

I consider clubbing him with my tossed-off heels, wondering what his pudding back would look like with purple bruises blooming. The man is blabbering on and on about Montreal in the summer, unaware and happy. I almost feel bad for him.

I move to the lower portion.

*Here, it is crucial to work the muscles on the coccyx. The tailbone. In concentric circles, move your thumbs around the bone structure in undulating waves, outwards and up, always. Slide your hands so that your ring fingers find the tops of the hips bones. Then do the work. Be mindful, again, of the spine.*

There are other things I know. How to massage the glutes, the thighs, the soft parts of the calves. Those are the most painful. We are always running. I do not touch the man past his lower back. He is still wearing his jeans.

The clock on the shelf reads 12:30. The man tells me I have amazing hands, much better  
“... than the other girls here. You’re a hidden gem. And so pretty. But you’ve done  
enough. I’m going to flip.”

The flip is a part I will come to understand well. It means that they’ve had enough of the  
pretend. They want what they’re come for.

The man flips himself over on the table and wiggles his pants off.

His belt is the loudest thing in the room. It sounds like breaking. It clanks. He eagerly  
throws his jeans with the belt in the loops to the floor.

He is naked.

My smile hitches higher. He looks at me.

The only time I’ve seen a man completely naked and in the same room as me is when  
I’ve had a boyfriend and convinced myself I loved him.

He’s erect. I thought it would be uglier. It’s not that it’s not ugly, only that it’s a logical  
extension of his being.

I pull a condom out from the black pouch I brought with me. They are off-brand and  
brand new. I bought a sixty pack.

I tear the package open and unfurl the condom. The lube smell is already in my nostrils.  
My hands are slippery. The man has one hand on my lower back, *feeling*, while the other holds  
his dick taught and upright, I guess to help me. I slide the condom down.

It fits. I stifle a snort.

I slide my mouth over it. I do not gag at the prophylactic taste, the way the coating comes  
up over my tongue. I bob up and down. I feel my insides kaleidoscope. The sounds he makes  
makes me consider how pleasurable having a dick is, and if I did, if I would pay to get it sucked.

I continue the pantomime.

His hand has pried its way into my underwear and is touching me. I make small, conciliatory sounds because I can feel my atoms pulling themselves apart. Every time he hits my throat I think of myself. *Hit*. When I was seven and would ride my bike up and down the street that gave way to my Brossard bungalow. *Hit*. My godmother giving me flowers after my first solo show at the skating gala. *Hit*. They were sunflowers. *Hit*. When I won a silver medal at the science fair in secondary three. *Hit*. Me in the backyard reading Eliot out loud and falling in love. *Hit*. His fingers have found my soft tissue. They probe in a way that is no way pleasure inducing but I pretend.

He can't rub my clit properly. He's off by half a centimeter.

I choke.

He uses the opportunity to express that fact that he wants me on top of him by urgently pulling at my forearms in an upward motion. He's lost the ability to communicate effectively. I climb on top. My knees are exposed. He slides his thumbs up my dress bottom and makes an attempt to lift it off and I help. I catch myself in the mirror.

It's me but I'm compromised.

Of course, I knew what I was getting into, but seeing myself, bare-kneed, bare-everything, honestly naked on top of a flesh colored man looks so much worse than I would have anticipated.

I feel myself burn behind my eyelids. I look small. I am naked. My eyes scream. My mouth is contorted.

I lower myself on to him and I feel the familiar plunge but no wanting. I do arithmetic. I feel him inside moving, stretching. Two times two is four. Four times four is sixteen. Sixteen

times sixteen is complicated. I bend at the middle, clasp my hands over his shoulders to hide my face.

I hide my face in his soft tissue shoulder blade. Two-hundred and fifty-six. He pumps.

Repetitive.

I think of fractions.

I fucking hate fractions.

I press my knuckles into my orbital socket. He continues. I play pretend active participation. He's still going. I can hear his thighs, slapping thin, white meat. Loose. Moving.

My eyes are shut tight to the point of exploding silhouettes played behind eyelids.

At some point he makes plaintive gestures, indicating he wants me off. I readjust. My legs are wet. He gets up, folds me on the table, pushes his fist into the small of my back, holds it there. There shouldn't be a fist in my spinal tissue.

“Now you'll know, older men can fuck.”

Before I can stop myself, I'm laughing. A deep guttural hitched laugh that comes out in retches.

And so he starts fucking me. I shake. I hit the massage table. In an hour I will have bruises on my hip bones. Purple blooming hyacinths on the ignored parts of my body. He holds my head down by holding a clump of my hair. I see colours. I see a heap of broken images. My ribcage heaves.

He's upright. I'm a hinge. I look up. The door is still locked.

I look left and the clock says 12:45.

I am laughing too hard for calculus. I would like to cry. I can see myself in the mirrors again, naked and heaving. He's still pounding. I don't know when, exactly, my mouth opened

but it's open and I'm screaming and laughing and if you weren't inside my head you could take this for lust, you could take this for enjoyment, you could take from this whatever you wanted.

I do not want to ruin my makeup. I laugh louder and louder and he goes faster and faster and I scream and he's almost done and I buck backwards and he grabs my hips and I feel new bruises and he screams and he's done.

He backs up.

I straighten up.

He removes the condom and throws it in the small black waste bucket. I tie my hair in a bun. My mouth twitches. I rinse myself in the shower before he gets in.

I'm in a towel. He rubs my shoulders. I shimmy and smile wide.

“So it's 150\$?”

I make a scene in my head because he knows what it costs. I ask if he's bad at math. I tell him I'm very good at it, I've had lots of practice. He hands me money and tells me I'm something. Once I have the money, I tell him he's *okay*. He leaves. I pull my dress back over my head, step into the heels, all while crushing the bills in my palms. Eight of them.

I strip the sheets. I throw the clean ones over. I look at myself in the mirror and I don't know what to say to the girl hanging limply there. I was neither living nor dead, and I knew nothing.

I say more apologies in my head.

I touch my face. I push my hair behind my ears. I shake my head so my hair falls loose.

I sit on the carpet, bring my knees up to my clavicle, back pressed against the hard wood of the massage table and I cry and cry and cry until I'm sure my sobbing will shake the whole building to the ground.



## Blood Shaking

I spent the ride to the Rockies in the back of an RV while my dad drove and my uncle pointed out livestock. Cows. Horses. Some sheep. I was listening to sad music a boy I was adamant I cared about had loaded onto my phone. I sat in the U-shaped bench and looked at my hands cupped on the table. There was a window behind me but it was nothing but flat pastures and McMansions pushed far away from the highway, a clean three lanes in each direction that stretched out into the horizon. I had to crane my neck downwards and to the left, leaning out of my seat and its dubiously safe seatbelt to see out of the windshield.

For the first hour, the mountains were hidden. We rolled on blacktop in silence. I was mindful to not play my music too loud. Even though I was in the car with my immediate family, I felt myself stretched tight in my skin, the pit in my stomach growing and my eyes threatening to spill their contents with every new note that was pumped into my ears via the oversized headphones I was wearing. Sometimes my uncle pointed in a vague direction, but the car moved too quickly for me to see what he was gesturing to. He turned around and I saw his mouth move, but I couldn't hear a word he said. I took off the headphones, made guttural noises instead of asking a question.

“We're going to turn off and take the smaller road. There's more chance of seeing the mountain sheep that way.”

“Alright,” I answered, nodding my head enthusiastically afterward in the hopes that I would seem interested and participatory.

“There's two herds. They're wild, you know. The sheep I mean. They roam around the park and migrate, though they mostly stay in the lower valleys.”

I nodded again, unsure of what I could add to the conversation. The RV steered into the

shoulder and the low groan of the rumble strip filled the vehicle with noise until my dad corrected our trajectory. I put my headphones back on and listened to the music, fighting the urge to believe that my pain was somehow both intensely special and banally universal. There was something about listening to French music in Alberta I wanted to vocalize, but the words would not appear.

We did not see any sheep, though my uncle gave us a historical rundown of their genesis that was as banal as my current existential angst. Park management had decided to move them over to the west of the park in order to help promote a larger herd with more pastures and less cars to splatter them, but the herd numbers had actually dropped in recent years.

I had moved to Calgary that summer, hoping that if I put enough distance between myself and Montreal I would suddenly start feeling better. There was also the fact that I had burnt most of my friendships and self-worth in a drug-fueled bender that had lasted the better part of May, June and July, but I told myself that burning bridges was one way to light my future. Whatever the truth was, I had packed a backpack and taken a plane to YYC where I hitched a ride to my uncle's place in Elbow River and rang his doorbell. Although he had been surprised to see me, he had no kids and his two dogs appreciated my company when he went off to work every morning.

The mountains came into view slowly, a grey mass in the distance, blotting out the end of the highway. As we approached, they grew steadily upwards, their peaks tangled and twisted at various angles. I looked at the peaks, trying vainly to remember what they were named, which ones I had already climbed in my brief mountaineering debut with my dad.

We drove straight through Banff, a tourist trap with lines of people attempting to somehow fit themselves and the scenery into a picture filled with teeth and sun hats. When we

had climbed Mount Lefroy the year before, we were greeted by a dubious family of five from the States who informed us we were crazy for climbing a mountain. *You can see it perfectly well from here!* the matriarch had informed us, and though we laughed at her, I felt sad at the same time because she thought the pile of rocks and scree that composed the mass of the mountain was what you came to the Rockies for.

We breezed through Lake Louise and drove another twenty minutes to Mosquito Creek campground in the Icefields. It was early September, and we had left early enough that it was only around noon when we got to the campsite. I had listened to the entirety of my music once through already and decided against another go as my nerves were shot from the first round. I was used to sleeping in the back of an old van with my dad whenever we went climbing and the RV was uncomfortably comfortable. I had set my sleeping bag in the overhead shelf above the driver's seat and was busy trying to find my hiking boots in the various bags we had thrown into the shower at the back of the RV. The RV had been my uncle's idea. My dad had been excited about it. I had pretended to be, as well, but parking it in the campground felt strange and oddly opulent.

"How about we all go for a walk?" my dad asked.

"I think I'll stay here and watch the RV. I've got a book I want to read anyway," said my uncle. He was not much of an outdoor enthusiast but my dad and I always made it a point to invite him with us on our trips. On the few occasions he did come out hiking with us, it was never more than a few kilometers, a very subtle incline, with my uncle repeating that we were trying to kill him. Still, I appreciated having another body between my father and I, as we had lately lapsed into a state of quiet concern, mostly on his part, at my general state.

"Jeez aren't you hot in that sweater?"

“No,” I answered. This was another lie, though there was no way I could wear short sleeves on this trip in fear that the concern of my father would grow unquiet if he saw my forearms.

“I’m going to take a hike and write,” I lied, stuffing a notebook into my daypack and shoving my feet into my boots.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to go survey some mountains. Maybe Hector?”

“Do you want some company?”

“Not currently,” I shot over my shoulder, trying hard to avoid my dad and his magnified eyes. His glasses were dirty. I had a bad habit of breaking into tears anytime I looked at people and I knew I wouldn’t be allowed to go off on my own if that happened.

“I got bear spray! If it’s longer than 6 hours get worried,” I yelled, my feet connecting with the dirt as I jumped the steps out of the RV and went jogging down the path that led to the entrance of the campsite.

I ran harder than I meant to and almost lost my footing on the curve out of the campsite. I saw some other campers stop their walk to watch me rush by and they raised a hand. I raised mine back.

When I got to the highway there were cars zooming by and I had to resist the urge to keep running. I slowed, put my hands on my hips and pushed out air in heaps, feelings my heart in my ears, the copper tang in the back of my throat. There was a brief moment where I thought it would be safe to cross and I took it before realizing that the car coming towards me on the right side was either closer or quicker than I thought. I looked into its windshield as my feet smacked the asphalt. I imagined myself splattered over the Albertan highway, my backpack in

tatters and my body pulped, but I made it to the other side and breathed out, exhilarated. I hopped the metal rail, slalomed down the side of the bank that lead to the forest and continued my run.

I have never enjoyed running, but much like mountaineering, drug abuse, and serial fucking, there's an element of self-harm that I appreciate. It was colder among the trees and I was glad for my sweater, though I was starting to sweat along the nape of my neck and the crease of my thighs. I doubled down on my speed, tucked my arms closer to my body and breathed through my teeth. When the metal taste came back in my throat, I spat at the rocks that lined the trail.

I had no idea where I was heading. Half of me wanted to run off the trail and into the mountains in a conscious effort to get lost, but I knew that the fear I was feeling would quadruple and I would probably end up regretting that decision the moment I realized that what I had done was serious. I had made stupid conscious decisions frequently in my life, but I knew the mountains were different, and that I was alone and small and very sweaty, all great for attracting animals. I kept running on the trail, bounding over small branches and occasionally looking up at the sun breaking through the canopy. There were clouds up there. I heard rushing water to my left and when I looked there was a roaring stream running in the opposite direction of me. I heard a bird call, then another, before I closed my eyes briefly and breathed in the wet smell of the Albertan forest.

I stopped running when I couldn't feel my legs and an errant rock sent me spread-eagled into the air and down into the ground. My foot throbbed. I had hit my knee and it seeped from my patella outward in hot streaky radials. I was curled into a ball holding my legs, teeth gritted, and moaning while I rocked on my back, my eyes slit. A volley of curses bubbled in my brain,

some directed at the rock, others at myself. I tried to stretch my knee and it screamed. I felt some of the words slipping out of my mouth and before I knew it I was yelling them, an incoherent composition of profanities and accusations aimed at the forest, my body, my stupid backpack, my useless hiking boots, the sun, the birds, the rocks, the river, my eyes for needing glasses and my mother for not believing me when I told her I couldn't see, my oldest sister for abandoning me when she had been my rock and pursuing a better life outside of Brossard and away from me, my other sister for silently agreeing with her and blocking my calls when I started crying every time she picked up the phone, the boy for giving me music that was about being sad and in love a week after breaking up with me even though we were not even together but I had gotten too attached, myself for letting him give me music and for listening to it, the fact that I had turned to selling drugs because I didn't have money anymore, the fact that all that had made me do was take the drugs I had been selling in order to stop feeling anything, for dropping my MA because it became too much to believe in writing and academia at the same time, my Icarus shame spiral that I had let get out of control in the hope of finding bottom if only for the stability, when I realized there was no bottom and that this could continue forever until I either killed myself or got killed and how I didn't care anymore, the culmination of my not caring ending in me moving to Calgary after squatting in my childhood home for months and scaring my parents into thinking that I was going to do *the bad thing*, that I was going to decide to *stop it*, that I was still so fucking sad even in Calgary, that I'm sad all the time and I can't make it stop, or make myself functional so I run away, the fact that the culmination of that had ended with me on the ground in the dirt holding my knee and screaming with my hair in my eyes and my hands reaching for things to throw and before I know it I'm standing and screaming and throwing rocks and kicking trees and I'm crying because I love the trees and I feel strongly about the rocks but I can't

control it and so I decide to throw the contents of my backpack and spare the forest my abuse and suddenly my notebook is out, and my spare socks, and my flashlight, and the bear spray, and the tape for my blisters, the emergency blanket, a single granola bar, extra hair elastics, my hat, my hiking poles and I can't tell what I'm screaming anymore but I know it's something related to the sinkhole that is Montreal, and now it's Brossard even though I love it, and I'm screaming because I never should have left the suburbs in the first place, I never should have gone to my first day of kindergarten, it was all downhill after that, the Original Mistake and I throw the backpack because there is nothing left to throw and suddenly I'm aware I'm alone and it's gotten colder and my face is wet and my voice is a wheeze coming in between hitched breaths and body convulsions.

I put my head between my legs, my forearms resting on my thighs and make myself count to ten while I roll my eyes in their sockets to stop my brain from misfiring. I look up and see the mess spiralling out from my epicentre, littering the forest. There are no birds singing. I sink into the ground, wishing it would eat me up, make me into something that belongs and has roots that are not sickly and incapable of staying permanently. I want to know how quickly and far I have to run to escape my biology and its ingrained mental illnesses. I do not know how long I have been gone and I decide that it's probably time to go back. Everything is scattered.

I pick it all up.

When I get back to the RV it is raining and I am soaked. I didn't pack a rain jacket. My dad is baking apples in the oven and puttering. He has made me a cheese sandwich that I pick at because I hate cheese. My uncle sits down across from me at the U-shaped table.

“So, what do you write about?”

*Long Pause.*

“Existential stuff. What’s happening. Myself.”

I have just read Wallace and I’m worried I’m a narcissist.

“Do you like writing?”

“As much as I like anything else.”

“How’s your stuff get graded?”

“Show up. And do well. I do okay. I’ve tricked them.”

“Are you going to do your PhD?”

“Yeah, at this point I don’t know what else to do.”

“You’re young. You could change career.”

“It’s not the career that’s the problem.”

“What do you like?”

“I don’t like things.”

“Have you tried ziplining? Or skydiving? I went ziplining with your dad, got right up the ladder and we were fifty feet in the air and he clipped in and off he went.”

“Is the clip in optional?”

“Have you considered the army? Or being a guide? You seem to really like it out here.”

“I haven’t thought about it. I’ll think about it.”

“Well, cheer up, okay?”

“Okay.”

“That’s an order.”

“Okay.”



## Fragments We Have Shored Against Ruin

J: I never consider the clothesline. The piece holding it to the house is pounded in with five nails and is rotting. The wheel is rusty. You have to force it to move, and the plastic-coated wire is hard under your palms, breakable. At the other end, a telephone pole. Or it used to be: internet, other clotheslines, home security, it all runs through that one pole. Next to a tree I once wrote a not very good poem about. I was being sentimental. I'm reminded when I look at the leaves. And the pole next to it, bleached by the sun and streaked with corneal brown lines that jut out at regular intervals. Sometimes squirrels. This was my view from every kitchen cleaning and dish washing. Trying to help *My Mother The Hoarder*, but just hurting. It was useless here. This is where everything came back to die. The sound of tap water off enamel sink, the pool full and too cold, covered by three trees. When I was little, I thought the shaded part at the end had sharks that would eat me. My sisters used to throw me in there as the thermometer and would lock the door when I screamed. They tied me to that tree once. My mom had out the whites that day. My neighbor had the peach tree that still had fruit. I would play my music too loud and no one complained. I saw the moon one freezing night at 4 a.m. when I couldn't sleep and decided nicotine was the answer. It killed me when I saw it full, gone from slivers to plentitude without my knowing or seeing or feeling, suddenly complete before me a half-second before I had time to expect it. And the clothesline, disappearing into the cherry tree, crossing over the pool and into pears and apples that were too hard to ever eat, but we promised every August to make pies with. The days spent lying on the peeling mahogany paint on a balcony built by my grandfather I never met, sticking to my body like birth-marks and dead skin. The nights in the shed, resolute spiders are just a nuisance, even if there are 50. In the rain, walking circles around the above ground pool in flowered galoshes in my father's rain jacket because I was depressed and

defeated and feeling like it couldn't get any worse even if I did my best to imagine it, and the old neighbor came outside and beckoned me over and I thought I was going to get life advice. But no. She gave me sugar cookies to my give mother for babying her Explorer rose. My mother's a diabetic. And I walked to the patio in the pouring rain with the cordless telephone from my parents' house getting water in the receiver and I saw the deck and the peeling and the paint and the crooked windows my dad and I tried to install and one just shattered and the barbeque that was covered in a tarp and the gazebo whose tarp blew off long ago in a thunderstorm and my dad had zip tied a tempo to it and it had torn to so he had added more zip ties and the wind chimes we got when my grandmother died and the sink my mother would watch me swim from forever and the clothesline stretching out from the house behind me into that pole and I considered the tree and the pool and the rhubarb that will kill you if you eat the leaves and I wondered if everyone feels safe when placed in immediate proximity to the place that you want to be home, or that isn't and is, or that has never left or you can't leave because neither option was an option and then staying isn't either. Not anymore. I never thought I would be sad. Nostalgia for the suburbs is misplaced absence. Then again, you moved away and seem fine about it, so maybe this is simply another manifestation of my festering mental illness.

Bea: No wonder you're dropping out of your MA. Do you have that memorized for when you bring people over?

J: Actually, yes. It offsets the crushing weight of suburbia and the depressing backyard.

Bea: I think you compounded it.

J: *(They walk over to a patio set in the middle of a gravel circle.)* Like, this empty circle. Want to hear something even more depressing? You're not actually allowed to have clotheslines in Candiac.

Bea: Because the kids would hang themselves?

J: Because they're unaesthetic.

*(Pause.)*

Bea: Well that took a turn.

J: Straight off the Champlain. And here we are, having doggy-paddled the abyss to make it all the way to the Shore.

Bea: I mean, it is geographically ideal.

J: At a bare minimum.

Bea: That's always been your favourite.

J: Easy to maintain. Well, thanks for coming and welcome, *welcome* to the finest backyard in all of Brossard. Or at least I think it is.

Bea: And what is it that we're sitting in?

J: Protection circle. Keeps the kids from Longueuil away.

Bea: *(Raised eyebrows.)*

J: My parents took the pool when they moved.

Bea: And you're still here because?

J: Were you not paying attention to that monologue? I like it here.

Bea: And the inside of the house is...?

J: Mostly gutted. I've been sleeping on some leftover cardboard boxes I found in the house and an old blanket I think my great grandmother quilted. Or died in. It's musty.

Bea: Charming.

J: Aren't you glad you decided to come over?

Bea: Yes. May I be struck down the minute these words leave my lips, but it's nice to be in

Brossard. It's not as bad as I remember.

J: It's the patio set, really helps. It's like we're having a very important board meeting.

Bea: And what would this meeting be about?

J: Commiseration. Inebriation. I would say fornication, if only for the rhyme, but truth be told I'm not that into you or fucking on cardboard boxes.

Bea: The first two sound nice. Got anything to drink?

J: If you count outdoor temperature gin and flat ginger ale a drink, then yes.

Bea: Not ideal, but none of this is.

J: You mind sharing a cup?

Bea: Such a hospitable squatter.

J: My parents didn't take the bathtub, so don't puke in it. Kindly use the bushes, located all around you.

Bea: Noted. You leave the gin in the shed?

J: Easier access.

Bea: *(Takes a sip.)* This tastes... somewhat alright.

J: This is the best combination I've found. Used to be vodka and orange juice, but if it gets too hot or you pour too much vodka in, it tastes like drinking lighter fluid.

Bea: I think something bit my ankle.

J: The back neighbor hasn't fixed their pool up so they're breeding mosquitos. You want some pants? May be some in the shed.

Bea: Nah, I'm good.

J: Alright. I'm not sure they would fit you, anyway. You've gotten tiny. Well, tinier. Then again, you are on a lot of coke. Looking model thin. It's a little scary.

Bea: I'm not hungry lately.

J: You might be if you put your keys down once in a while. That shit represses your appetite

Bea: You're selling it. Doesn't that make you partially responsible?

J: People are going to do what they're going to do. Besides, it's good money. *(Takes a sip.)* I don't know, maybe I'm an asshole and I'm just trying to validate my behavior.

Bea: Is that what the psych told you?

J: My psych tells me I've done surprisingly well considering what's happened.

Bea: What's happened?

J: That's the thing, I don't think much has. Childhood was whatever, my parents mean well enough, my sisters suck, but most siblings do. I don't know where it veered off.

Bea: I know. Remember when we used to get drunk in the garage? And one time we were dancing around, and we knocked over a row of bikes? We couldn't stop laughing, I thought my parents would wake up for sure.

J: I didn't understand why you had an entire row of bikes in your garage.

Bea: Or that time my dad did wake up and we were still in there smoking and drinking the yellow Coors and he just looked at us and you said, "Hi Papa Beatrice."

J: And all he did was tell you to open the garage door more and then left. He didn't seem impressed.

Bea: He wasn't. I think miss that garage.

J: Can't go back?

Bea: I miss the garage, not the things around it.

J: And the new apartment? The new roommates?

Bea: It's fine. More like a crack den than an apartment and my roommates are fucked up but it's

enough. I'm saving up money to get my own place and live alone. *(Takes a sip.)*

J: Fuck.

Bea: What?

J: Something bit me. Jesus. Felt like a wolf spider.

Bea: Do we have those in Quebec?

J: How the fuck should I know? It hurt.

Bea: Tell your therapist about it.

J: "Laura, things are crawling out of the woodwork of my childhood home and tearing into my flesh."

Bea: Well, when you put it like that...

J: I'm sick of seeing her. It's not like it's helping.

Bea: What would help?

J: Leaving. Did I tell you I'm leaving? I'm going to move to Calgary. My dad and I have a trip there in a few weeks. I think I'm going to stay with my uncle. Booked a one-way and everything.

Bea: Are you having a breakdown? Calgary?

J: I know some people from the bass scene, Len introduced me.

Bea: So, you're just going to be doing the same thing, but in Calgary?

J: Not the same. Here, I'm an MA student and squat in a bungalow. There, I will be a drop-out and live in a nicer unsquat-like bungalow with my uncle and his two dogs. I'm sick of Montreal.

Bea: Me too, but I'm not running away.

J: I'm not running, I'm taking an airplane with Air Canada.

Bea: You tell your psych?

J: I don't tell her a lot of things.

Bea: That's the dumbest thing you've ever said.

J: Not true. Remember when I said I was moving to Calgary?

Bea: Do you think it'll help?

J: I don't know what helps anymore. I tried to make myself into a tree in the cemetery the other day. I dug a hole and got all dirty and grimy and then I tried to be a tree. Literally planted myself. All it did was get my socks gross when I put them back on and I got about 20 mosquito bites. I just can't live here anymore; this place hurts too much.

Bea: Have you considered a bed instead of cardboard on the floor? Might ease your pain.

J: Your levity is appreciated and sensitive. Pass me the gin, you're heating it up with your clammy, coke hands.

Bea: That reminds me. *(Pulls out a baggie.)* You want a line?

J: Yes, please. See? This is the type of sensitivity I require.

Bea: Drugs?

J: *Sharing drugs.* And only the fun ones, the pharmaceuticals have been fucking me up.

Bea: Also the work of your psych?

J: She thinks I need to be medicated.

Bea: You probably do.

J: Yeah, but it doesn't mean I want to be.

Bea: That's fair. *(Does a line.)* Here. *(Passes the phone with a rolled up bill to J.)*

J: Thank you kindly. *(Inhales.)* This stuff really blows.

Bea: I am so happy you're dropping your degree.

J: Me too. I can add this to the list of *Things Helen and Donald are Unhappy About and Why I am a Huge Disappointment.*

Bea: I think you're a minor disappointment.

J: That feels belittling.

Bea: No, I mean you could be doing worse things.

J: Yeah, I'm only dropping out of school, squatting in a soon-to-be demolished house, and trying to bury myself in the cemetery on weekdays. At least I'm not whoring myself out.

Bea: That's where you draw the line?

J: I couldn't do it.

Bea: It's not that hard.

J: You speaking from experience?

Bea: Yeah

*(Pause.)*

J: Past or currently?

Bea: Current. I want that drink back.

J: Beatrice.

Bea: *(Sips.)*

J: Bea, what the fuck. When did this happen?

Bea: When I needed to pay rent and every month I had to decide between that and having food.

And working at that shitty décor store for minimum wage. I got tired.

J: You got *tired*?

Bea: Yeah, tired. Tired of going nowhere, tired of working too hard with nothing to show for it.

J: Because now you have a lot to show.

Bea: More than before. I don't have a panic attack when I have to buy a sandwich because I'm hungry. I work 3 days a week and make more money than I used to in a month working full time.



Am I happy about it? No. I'm making the most financially sound decision for myself at this point in time.

J: You're fucking people for money.

Bea: And sometimes I fuck them for free and feel the same afterwards.

J: Maybe you should talk to someone about that. You can afford to.

Bea: I'm saving it. I told you I want to get my own place. I'm planning on making enough to live for a year and have some savings, too.

J: Jesus, when did you start doing this?

Bea: A few months back.

J: And you're still doing it?

Bea: I'll probably have to for a few more months.

J: For your savings?

Bea: Yeah.

J: And all the money going to buy coke?

Bea: I make that back in an hour, maybe two if they're not my regulars.

J: *Regulars*. Holy shit.

Bea: Some of them are okay. One guy is a plastic surgeon, scariest smile in the world, looks like he ate a pack of whitening gel. He offered to fix my nose for me to make me 'perfect.'

J: What in the fuck?

Bea: He's insane. But some of them are okay. Most of them are too stupid to see that I'm taking them for a complete ride. Whatever it takes to get a bigger tip.

J: That's gross.

Bea: I take showers like 18 times a day. I'm squeaky clean. Where's the gin?

J: (*Hands her the bottle.*) Oh, you're just drinking it straight now?

Bea: I need to disinfect my insides.

J: That's a mental image I did not need.

Bea: We're out of mix, Joan.

J: *Joan.* Right you are. Well. Tell me more about your day job.

Bea: Some guy beat me up once. He was a real catch. Complete nut job on his cell phone the entire time talking to his friend about how he's going to be late to the Habs game. Meanwhile, he's shoving his cock into my mouth and I'm doing my best to fight the urge to bite down on his dick because I'm seriously about to get annoyed. I guess my efforts were in vain; he says I nicked him or something equally dumb. Then he started hitting me and yelling I was a whore. Which, yes, correct, you're literally at a whorehouse, stupid fuck. The manager got some people to beat him up because in his words he, "damaged valuable merchandise." I got paid extra that day.

J: Fuck, Beatrice.

Bea: My name there is Anastasia. It's one of the more colorful encounters. I had black eye for a few days. Nothing serious. It looked pretty cool. (*Sips.*) What are you doing?

J: (*Going through her bag.*) I need this less than you do. You know that name means rebirth in Greek?

Bea: Seriously? And you're going to eat 200 dollars for me?

J: Fuck it, I don't want your fuck-money, 8 ball on the house. Put it in your savings, not up your nose. This may be bad timing, but I want another line.

Bea: You're taking this surprisingly well.

J: I've done some fucked up shit too. It's just, I never would have thought we'd end up here.

Bea: I know, Brossard is pretty terrible, even on an evening on a Saturday in the summer.

J: The backyard is nice, though. (*Inhales.*) I can taste the inside of my nose.

Bea: That is truly disgusting. Here. (*Passes the bottle.*)

J: I want mix. This I cannot do.

Bea: You little bitch. I remember once I was walking through Brossard alone at night and I never knew if I should take the bike paths they put everywhere to shortcut the long streets. They were always overgrown and dark. And then at some point, I started only walking through the bike paths. I think I liked being afraid.

J: I'll protect us from the bike path bandits.

Bea: Worst they'll do is steal the gin.

J: Fuck that.

Bea: Valid. Whenever I'm back here I feel like I'm five years old again. I spent my entire life growing up in this one place and my memory can't adjust, like everything is compacted into a reel with all my memories happening at the same time in bits and pieces. Maybe someone should take that gin.

J: Nonsense, do a bump. It'll be fine.

Bea: Sun's coming up.

J: Good time as any to go inside. We'll have to crawl into the house through the garage window or it sets off the alarm, which I can disarm, but my parents get the logs for that and I don't really appreciate the extra layers of concern when I show up at their place and they've had a lengthy discussion with Alarm Force about me showing up to the house at 3 in the morning.

Bea: Your parents are wild.

J: They're doing their best. Lately I can't get mad at them.

Bea: We're seriously crawling through a window?

J: Yes, come on. Just watch out, it's a bit of a drop.

Bea: Always is.

*(They open the small window and both crawl through. J uses her phone's flashlight to illuminate the room.)*

Bea: Fuck, your parents took the walls when they left?

J: Nah, I did that. This whole place is full of aluminum wiring. Besides, I've been using the walls for something.

Bea: Which is.

J: *(Shines light to the end of the room.)* I made a replica of the Champlain bridge. Took the summer, but I've been sleeping here almost every night and you know what they say about idle hands.

Bea: It looks like shit.

J: It's made of drywall.

Bea: So we came in to look at your arts and crafts project?

J: No, we came in to burn the arts and crafts project. Aluminum wiring is highly flammable. My mother never let me forget. If I'm leaving Brossard forever, I'm taking my house with me.

Bea: I take back what I said about you not being fun anymore.

J: Wanna bash some walls down before it's gone? I promise it's cathartic.