Locator

by

Shelley Alexandra Miller
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In Missoula, Montana, in the 1970’s, an artist installed eight steel pipes pointing in different directions on posts in an open field. North; Northeast; East; Southeast; South; Southwest; West, Northwest. They were called “Locators,” and in the middle of the scenery, under the wide, arching Montana sky, they beckoned spectators to peer through. With both eyes kept open—one focused through the locator and the other free—the viewer might have understood the vastness of the landscape. The Locators allowed the spectators to alter their vision and interact with the land; each new perspective acted like a root, joining human with land.
The Jetty

Ty went alone, a decision he felt he might regret. The view of the *Spiral Jetty* from atop the steep hill above it would have been best experienced with someone holding his hand and echoing his gasps.

But he was accustomed to solitude and on the lip of that hill he was not entirely alone. A tall sunflower arched at his height, bowed to him when the wind caught it. He was in horsefly and Mormon Tea territory. Ty looked at the water before him, a plate of brine shining red because of all the salt. The *Spiral Jetty* curled out into it like an insect antenna crystallized into the earth: quiet, still, eternal.

It was August and dry; it had been dry all year so the *Jetty* was able to peek out from the water after having been submerged for many years. The air smelled like the lake: putrid, but only to the unaccustomed nose. In the valley in the rain, a stench of sulfur settled in, and having grown up there, Ty was not nauseated by the rotten smell of the Great Salt Lake. On a hot day like that, though, it didn't need to rain for the lake to reek. Ty scrunched his nose at the smell of the warm saline, not in repulsion but because it pleased him. Not many people he knew had actually been to the lake; it was distant and boasted little more than brine shrimp. Those Utahns with boats might sail on it but never went for a dip. It was Ty's first time there.

Ty had known Erich had to fire him. It was about Ty’s inability to bounce back. The job at the diner had been offered to Ty out of pity, after the incident. Erich had tattoos on the insides of his wrists and what looked like wingnuts affixed to his ears. He had been good friends with Ty's girl before she died. At times, it had seemed
to Ty that they were too good of friends, and even before she was gone Ty had let the idea of her with Erich approach the surface of his mind.

Ty had been fucking up at work but it was hard to tell at first because it seemed that so was everyone else. It wasn't uncommon for the employees of the diner to work stoned. One waitress, impossibly thin with a ring that dipped from one nostril to the other, had supplied her fellow employees with a small bottle of eye drops tucked away behind the cash register; hidden from whom, Ty was never sure, as he had seen even Erich use it to clear his eyes before the dinner rush. Ty wasn't shy about joining the waitresses on their smoke breaks. Quickly, though, his abilities in the diner deteriorated. The heavy-liddedness of being high made him slow and he dropped things often. He forgot orders as quickly as they were voiced. When he tried to stop smoking so much, he only got worse. He abandoned friendliness with the customers and, soon after, with the other employees. It was the longest stretch of his life, he realized, in which he had not made eye contact with another person. It had been three weeks.

“Sorry,” Erich said, folding Ty’s apron into an awkward lump, evidently unsure of what to do with the wayward ties that hung down limply, almost touching the ground. He looped them around the mass of cloth. “I know you miss her.”

Erich had waited until the diner had closed and most of the other employees had left for the night to let Ty go. He had put Ty to work taking inventory to account for the following week’s specials, which kept him there long after closing. Ty suspected he wouldn't be around to serve them. Before leaving, one of the waitresses,
the one with soft brown hair and a pleasantly gapped smile, slipped an envelope into Ty's breast pocket.

"What," Ty said.

"It's an invitation. Kind of short notice, I know, but I'm sealing the deal. Wish me luck," she said and gave Ty a small hug. Ty did not let go of his clipboard but let the girl, certainly one of the prettier waitresses, embrace him. He enjoyed the clutch of her slender arms; it was a sensation he had not faced since the death. The waitress left, her apron tied like a present at the small of her back, and Ty returned to his inventory.

“I know I can’t send you off like this with nowhere to go. I can’t, really, can I?” Erich said after Ty had placed the finished inventory page on the bar. Ty said nothing. “Let me just jot down a few numbers.” Erich ripped a sheet from Ty’s menu pad and began searching for a pen. There was one behind his ear, Ty noticed, but instead of telling him, he imagined his girl’s tongue flicking his boss’s tragus. The slackening of her tongue against the curved landscapes of an ear. But to whom had she done it with more feeling, Ty let himself wonder. To shun the ghost feeling of her mouth against his ear, he turned quietly to a line of postcards taped up along the wall. Erich discovered the missing pen, put it to the menu pad paper, and scrawled out a mess of phone numbers.

“Give these a try, Ty. There might be someone with a position for you. Susan’s cool, she’s down at Nobrow Café.”

“You bet.”
Otherwise, there was nothing he could say. Perhaps a plea that, please, he
needed this job, just another chance, he wouldn’t fuck it up, have a heart, you knew
her too, you’re doing this to her too.

And he thought again about what Erich had known about her, how he may
have known her. Ty felt dizzy. He would need to leave before having to sit down in
the very place where he had just been fired. He stumbled through the door, giving
only a small salute with his finger to his temple, the wedding invitation a small
weight against his chest.

It hadn’t been a secret that she was sleeping with other men. They would
discuss it over dinner, asking each other what to do about it. Neither wanted to leave;
whether that meant leaving the apartment they shared or each other never was clear.
He never let her tell the names of the other men because he preferred merely to
suspect. Suspecting meant not knowing for sure, which teased Ty into believing
maybe none of it was true. After dinner, she would cry; he would wash their dishes
while she turned on the news and curled onto the couch with the afghan, leaving her
ankles bare, which Ty liked. The living room was only separated from the kitchen by
a wall, thin enough so that Ty could hear her sniffle, reassuring him that she was still
as upset as he by it all. He made a plan to break every dish, systematically, safely in
the sink. A new set of dishes would be a fresh start, he liked to think.

In the living room after dinner, he would kiss her ankles. He figured no one
else would have gone for the ankles, perfect though they were, and so he considered
them his claimed territory. When he conceived of others touching any part of her, his
head vibrated and his forehead heated, so he would focus on her ankles, their rounded shapes, to force away the jealousy.

“We’re missing some forks,” she said to him one night while his cheek was pressed to her insole. “We’ll have to buy a whole set now. You can’t just buy three forks, and they wouldn’t match anyway.”

“New forks could make us happy,” Ty said, drawing the tip of his finger up the middle of her sole so it would appear that he was joking. She slipped her foot from his grasp. Ty had been throwing the forks away, about one a week.

An image of the rocky spiral hung from Ty’s rearview mirror, pierced by a paperclip. It had been one of the postcards at the diner, catching Ty’s particular attention by the way its yellowing tape was causing it to peel off the wall like a person ready to jump, and he snagged it when Erich was distracted by the pen that had gone missing behind his ear. The postcard had been pinned up before Ty landed the job, before he had met his girl, maybe before he had been born, but he knew much about what was on it. Robert Smithson, whose name appeared on the back of the card, was someone Ty had read about in high school. The pictured masterpiece, a work that had curled into Ty's imagination and took up residence in the more vivid part of his mind, was created to become a part of the earth around it, and, indeed, by the time the Spiral Jetty was completed, in 1970, the lake had already embraced it into its waves. Ty had been alive in the same valley for twenty-four years and had always existed only as an individual, never feeling the great inconceivable isolation of being a part of something much bigger.
She could have been it, his massive unknown. Before she died, he had been in the process of either forgiving her or letting her go. It was a decision he thought about to make the sharpness of it in his mind feel a little softer but, truly, he didn’t want to be isolated from her.

She was buried in the cemetery across the street from the football stadium. Until the funeral procession, Ty had only ever seen deer frequent the graves. When he was a kid and would pass by the cemetery in his parents’ car, he would hold his breath until the last fence post passed, afraid to lose his soul to the dead. His memory of that, he figured, was why his visits to her grave had grown shorter, and though he wasn’t holding his breath, he wanted to have less of the cemetery. He would sigh at the skittish deer and the despondency of the living and be out of air in his lungs. His girl had taken her own life and he was left alone in a flat valley with a dead sea.

Ty missed the turnoff that led past the Golden Spike Memorial; he had miscounted the number of cattle grates that his directions told him to cross because he was thinking about her. He remembered the arts festival: he still had that haircut, and she had dark under her eyes from lack of sleep—the anxiety of having just moved in with him. But it must have been before things went wrong, because Ty remembered the sincerity of her happiness: her eyes shone despite their sleepiness, her body remained plump, her hair still smelled of soap and mint. She seemed to find pleasure in leafing through sheets of silver photographs and LPs from Slow Train Music, the place where even the grungiest locals shopped for what they liked. She was a loud
girl but in this moment she was silent, perhaps thinking only of the way her fingers
danced along the cardboard envelopes.

A tent of posters boasting bright colors had pulled the couple in, and now, together, they perused the silk screens of oranges, blues, and silvers, of mystical creatures spelling out band names with their teeth or tentacles. An octopus arm reaching from a print of a capsizing ship seemed to have wrapped itself around Ty's attention, as he did not notice that his girl had left his side. Once untwirled from the poster's grasp, he found her giggling by the credit card reader with the artist. The man was young looking, but his youth was obscured by a heavy, reddish beard. Ty didn’t remember the artist's name, which was scribbled on each of the posters, so instead he chinned the air at the guy, curled his arms around his girl's waist, and scooted out of the tent with her.

Each week that Ty knew her, she called her mother; she was faithful to that. She said she had her mother’s wrists, thin like avian bones; they were a frail clan. Only once had she mentioned her father, a man with a wild fist, she said. Amongst friends, she dropped acid or gushed about famous men and beautiful women. Ty's own friends enveloped her, they seemed to like her. They would come over with beer and sit on the living room floor around her. Eventually, Ty felt, they became closer to her than to him, and when, finally, his spot next to her on the floor was filled with other contenders, Ty let himself be upset, but only silently. She had told Ty, in the beginning, he was "the most alarming creature" she had ever met and, many times, that she loved him.
It wasn’t long after they had moved in together that she fucked someone from a new coffee shop she had decided to try. About a month later, she admitted it to Ty. Because it was the first time, Ty asked her why, but he didn’t listen for the answer.

He soon became so preoccupied with her infidelity, thinking he could steam it away like a wrinkle, that he didn’t see where things were actually going wrong with her, when her eyes first began to dull and her skeleton began to show and her hair cracked and smelled only like her skin. Instead, he would wonder what parts of the other men were better than him. He was kind; he had never hit her, but he knew he was no longer her "alarming creature." When he learned of the coffee shop betrayal, his anger had itched at him in such a way that he felt it wasn’t he who was beginning to clench his fist. But it only remained an itch.

A year later, Ty offered to take her to the arts festival again, despite his distrust of the young artists who made her blush and giggle or who eyed her like she was a canvas or hot glass ready to be molded. He hadn't realized that he had forgotten the sound of her giggle. She declined, choosing instead to remain at home and smoke her cigarettes. Ty could only stay with her as she curled tighter and tighter into the couch, afraid to leave the apartment because she might call someone else up.

An hour before sunset, Ty climbed back down the hill, leaving his shoes at the trail and approaching the Jetty itself. The black rocks were hot and more jagged than he had anticipated, but he continued to walk along the spiral in his bare soles rather than return to the shore behind him.
Ty soon found water licking at his ankles, as he had ventured off the rocks and onto the salt, scarcely noticing as he walked blindly to some rhythm in his head. The matter beneath his feet was unlike anything he had ever felt before, like crushed ice, but tepid, settled below the water. His pants could not cuff any higher, so he removed them and everything else, leaving it all folded on the dry rocks. Brine flies took off and landed on his bare skin.

One hundred yards from the shore and Ty was still only up to his thighs. The salt water lapped at his legs as he pulled them forward. His skin sparkled where the water had splashed and the salt had clung, leaving a glinting, itchy layer.

Just before the sun set, he lay back into the water, letting his legs and his arms float, outstretched. He had heard a body could float in the Great Salt Lake, but he wouldn’t have truly believed it until this moment. Salt water trickled across his mouth and nose, his forehead, his closed eyes.

"Have you talked to your mother?" Ty asked from a wooden chair in the kitchen. She was in the living room where he couldn't see her but he was imagining her ankles.

"Why would I talk to my mother?" she said with a sharpness.

Ty assumed she was angry because of the plate; it had smashed into pointed shapes in the sink. He had said it was an accident. That afternoon, while she strolled slowly down the street to find cumin and maybe a bottle of wine from the liquor store for dinner, Ty had answered a call on her phone from a man who had stammered, tried to offer a cable package, and then hung up. The name on the phone read just
"Phil." Ty had known not to answer it but he had felt like he might win his private game of suspicion if he did. Then he helped her cook dinner, she who had long earlier in the evening forgotten about her phone. He had begun by splattering olive oil on his long flannel sleeves. His girl reached around him and folded each sleeve up. Over a cooking pot of broccoli and other green things, Ty told her about the call. The pot was thrumming and she reached over the steam to turn the peg at the back, a design flaw in the old appliance. The steam wrapped around her forearm like a sleeve and Ty expected her to scream, but she didn't.

"What?" she said.

Ty looked into the broccoli, noting how its color changed brighter when cooked. She began again to pester the chicken sautéing on another burner, letting her hair fall from behind her ear, Ty knew, so that he couldn't see her face.

"I'm not asking you. I'm just telling you what happened. Phil called. Please don't call him back."

The brine started to sting his eyes but Ty had no remaining patch of skin dry or saltless with which to rub them clean. He knelt in the water and tightened his eyelids to push out the salt. He stayed there, squinting, for what he could only guess to be half an hour. Finally able to open his eyes, though still feeling painfully blind, Ty waded back to the rocks. His feet were sore and pruned and tender against the sharpness of the Jetty's rocks. His tongue felt raw, like from eating sunflower seeds, and his throat burned from the brine that had trickled between his lips.
Ty thought of her slender fingers, how they might have danced along his bare shoulders now, and the mint smell of her hair. The name "Phil," its temporary inscription on the screen of her cell phone, loomed through his mind, but only like a quick, tired storm. Ty's clothes, once he had found them, offered some means of wiping away the salt crystals from his face. The rest of the salt began to rub away as he dressed, and it felt as if he were dusting himself clean.

By nighttime, still no one else had arrived at the Jetty. Ty hiked farther north in case someone did, unwilling to encounter another voice or face. He climbed and descended hills and, for hours, had lost the shore. He arched his direction so that it would point him to the lake, and he found it in time—around two in the morning, he guessed. The flies had desisted; it had gotten too cold in the dark for them. It was there at the shore, somewhere up north beyond the Jetty, that Ty lay down and slept in the grass.

There was one more time she betrayed him, just days before the end. She didn't come home at all one night; all pretense of secrecy had been abandoned. In the morning before it was light, he had watched her from the bedroom window as she drifted home in the middle of the street. It was so early that the edges of the road were still lined with cars, their owners tucked inside their homes for another few hours. Two houses down, she dropped to the asphalt. She clutched her knees to her chest and bowed her head, but only for a minute or so. Ty watched her rise again and eye her reflection in a sedan window; she ran the tip of her middle finger below each eye to wipe away the crumbs of leftover makeup. The earliest rays of morning light had
caught in her curls, making them look invisible. A few minutes later, after hearing the
locks, Ty discovered her in the kitchen in the previous day's clothing, smoking a
cigarette on a wooden chair. He could see, once in the kitchen, a swell in her eyelids.

"Clair," he murmured, surprising himself as if he had forgotten her name.

She was blank, did not turn to his voice. Ty went back to sleep.
The dirt out by the front porch steps was soft from a runoff, due to a break in the gutter above it. Mac had been saying he’d get around to fixing it soon enough, but, in truth, his young wife liked it because she could bask in the sun there with her baby on her hip, and the swollen ground would be kind to her swollen feet. Her baby was new, and, having just turned nineteen, she felt as if she had only just left newness herself.

Mac had been traveling up from the South for years, he had told her, and only stopped when he found her. He was several years older but seemed to have a spark-like attraction to the girl and it kept him put for now. So they both stayed in Great Falls, or outside of Great Falls, where their home seemed as if it had grown right out of the dirt, sprouting into wood beams and rattling windows.

There was talk, indeed, of leaving, because Mac tended to his restlessness as if it were a needy child. The destination was south of Montana to Utah, where his wife hadn't yet been. It was a few hundred miles away, only a few. Mac could dig in the quarries there, and there was just a little more money in that.

Perhaps no one appreciated the soft ground at the porch steps as much as the mutt, who was old. He was blind and deaf but he would sniff the air for marmots all day, and the ease with which he could undo the dirt and dig the rodents out must have been a pleasure.

The dog had been digging most of the morning after a marmot had been boldly cruising along the porch. The young wife, Andy, had seen the rodent from the
window and rapped at the glass, having grown sick of sweeping away piles of marmot shit ever since the creatures had emerged from hibernation. The old mutt had smelled it and emitted a high whine that unsettled the baby riding on Andy’s hip.

“Stupid dog,” she said, and opened the front door. The old mutt bounded out but crashed dumbly into the screen door. The door swung open and bounced off the wall and slammed back in place. The baby shrieked at the noise and she said again, louder, “Stupid dog.” She wasn’t often cruel to the animal; he had been hers since she was much younger and it was because of her pleading that Mac had allowed the dog to follow the couple to their home once they had married. Pregnant, wedding, dog (picked up from Andy’s mom’s place), then baby. It had happened in less than a year and in that order. She was unkind to the animal she loved that day because she had found that morning one small thing that threatened to undo the weaving of her life over that past year.

Mac had left on the laundry bench his denim jacket; a pocket bulged and in it was crumpled lace. The underwear had unfurled in Andy’s hand like a lotus flower. She did not recognize it as her own. Instead of gasping, she took the underwear and placed it in the center of the dinner table, where Mac would surely not overlook it a second time. For the rest of the day, though, the panties were a nodal point and Andy would pivot her head to glimpse them, unsure whether it would be better to replace them in Mac’s pocket or else pitch them at the bottom of the trash can out back.

The old mutt was in and out all day and had tracked prints of wet dirt through the house. But Andy didn’t yell at the animal anymore, having chided herself for the verbal abuse she had doled out to him in the morning. In her guilt, she had also
propped the doors open so he could come and go as he pleased, and by late afternoon she had seen the great deal of work he had done in the ground. It was a deep hole and a wonder no marmots had been caught, though the dog was slow. Andy stood at the top of the porch steps and studied the crater; a good deal of rocks and detritus had been unearthed but no roots, despite all the trees that surrounded the house. From the road up the driveway, a car drove by, playing a familiar song, something by the Talking Heads. The song had played at Andy’s senior prom, but she couldn’t remember the name of it by the time the car had long passed.

Though the dirt hole was a problem, she decided to reward the hard work of the old mutt with a scrap of something aging but meaty from the refrigerator. Andy set the baby on the dinner table and turned to the fridge, as the baby was still so small that it had not yet learned to crawl around.

“Susan, nuh-uh!” Andy barked as she pulled a slice of ham out. She dropped the cold cut to the linoleum where the dog quickly devoured it, and she pulled the lace garment from her baby’s fingers. “Not yours, Susan,” she cooed, shocked at her own tenderness while the underwear was still in her grasp. “This isn’t ours.” She placed the panties back where they were and whisked her baby up to go admire the hole outside again.

Andy pondered the hole and considered calling her mother. Ever since there was word of the couple and Susan moving to Utah, though, Andy’s mother had been hard to talk to, even hard to get a hold of. She was a Great Falls woman and expected it of her children. *Andrea, you may marry that boy, but he takes you any farther south*
than Helena, her mother warned, you’ll be kissing me goodbye. Andy herself felt like a weed uprooted, victim to any gust of wind.

It was summer, so it did not grow dark until eight thirty, which was when Mac arrived home. The baby had been put to bed, though Andy would have liked Susan to see her father at least once that day. The old mutt was asleep at the door, whimpering every so often for the arthritis in his ankles.

“Damn dog dug a big hole right outside,” Mac grumbled, letting the screen door slam behind him. Andy grimaced, fearing the noise would startle the baby, though Mac seemed not to notice it.

“I saw,” Andy said. She was sitting at the head of the dinner table, the expanse of wood extending between husband and wife.

“What’s that?” Mac pointed at the underwear.

“You tell me, Mac.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Well, it’s not mine.”

Mac said nothing but moved to the kitchen and pulled a beer from the fridge, though he had already been drinking and had the smell about him that had made Andy’s insides upset since her pregnancy. Andy looked out the window past the front porch to settle herself and caught sight of a lonely Doe turning round the corner of the house. At once it was perfectly still, but then tiny muscles throughout the Doe’s body erupted in movement as she searched for a morsel.

“Who?” Andy asked without removing her eyes from the window. Mac didn’t answer. Then, “Are you sorry?”
“I don’t have to explain myself, Andy.”

The doe’s path was beginning to arch around the front of the house. It toed the ground with its foreleg and, once it discovered an edible shrub, stood like stone and chewed.

“No?”

“Not at this point in my life,” Mac said and quaffed the bottle of ale.

“You’re damn near twenty-five years old, Mac. When will you be old enough to give me an explanation?”

“I’m not talking about this with you.”

“Then when?”

Mac lifted Andy by the elbow. “I’m not talking about this.” With his hold on her, he thrust her against the wall; a print of thyme and other herbs fell from a hook to the floor. He moved away from her. “Why don’t you open some windows in this house? It’s hot as hell,” Mac said.

“You’re hot because you’re drunk.”

“Maybe.”

Mac moved to the front door and as he opened it Andy muttered, “I’m not going to Utah with you. Neither is Susan. We’re staying here. And if you leave now, don’t come back.” She lifted her chin in the air at the last syllable, as if it were her conquest of the little house outside Great Falls. The screen door slammed. Through the window, Andy saw her little doe startle at the man on the porch and leap away, and in the next moment a loud shout was heard from out front.
Mac was in the dirt hole, wailing and gripping the pants on his left leg. It was bent at a sorry angle. Andy pushed open the screen.

“What’d you do?” she asked, still at the top of the stairs.


“You can’t walk?”

“Please, help me.”

Andy took a wide path around the hole, afraid it was a trick, but Mac did not look at her, just winced and felt at the bone. She went back in the house and called an ambulance, having locked the front door, still afraid Mac was faking the fall. But she looked through the window every few minutes and Mac had not moved.

After half an hour, she brought a glass of water outside. Moths and other night insects whizzed past her into the light of the house as she moved onto the porch.

“I called an ambulance, so this better not be a joke.”

“It’s not a joke, Andy.”

“Do you want some water, then?”

“Please.”

Andy descended the steps and knelt near Mac’s head. She tried to pour the water into his mouth but he was sideways and it just trickled into the dirt. She lifted his head and rested it in her lap and poured again, this time getting most of the water down into his mouth. She had begun to stroke his feather-soft hair by habit.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, and waited for the ambulance to come.
The old mutt had died in the year after Mac’s leg broke. Mac, still hobbling, went out back and dug the dog a hole; Andy had heard him curse at the thick roots that made the job more difficult. Mac was kind after the dog died, but the extra kindness soon rotted and returned him to his normal manner. The hole out front had been filled up, so, instead, Andy often would stand where the dog had been buried because there was shade. Susan, when she could walk, plucked weeds from the yard to put where she had been told the old dog was just sleeping. Sometimes she had even found some wildflowers. Soon, though, Susan understood that the dog was gone.

Andy was pregnant again, nearly six years later. When an ambulance was called to the house outside of Great Falls for a second time, Andy had been bleeding real good but the baby was removed safe at the hospital. Susan, almost six years old, was discovered in the house the next day by Andy’s mother, having spent the night alone after hiding from the men who had taken her mother away to the hospital, including Mac.

"Daddy made the baby come out," Susan had said when Andy had finally returned home and coaxed her daughter from her bedroom. Susan quickly took to her infant sister.

Andy, nearly twenty-five now, studied her daughters. They were like nesting dolls: the smaller one—unbelievably small—in the bigger one's lap. "Tempe was ready to come out on her own."

"He pushed you, I saw him."
Andy had thought she'd managed her balance well during those weeks when she really grew big with her second baby, but one of the dinner table’s chairs had been out. Mac's shove would have done little, had Andy’s belly not protruded, but he had not pushed in his chair after dinner and Andy couldn’t avoid hitting it when she fell.

"Tempe was ready to be with us. That's all, Susan."

Even in her infancy, Susan had seemed wary of her father, but with the untimely birth of her sister after Andy had screamed out in pain on the floor, she rejected Mac altogether.

They had agreed to move after Andy had the baby. So, once Tempe was born, Andy had to make good on her promise to leave for Utah, and the family departed Montana. Down they drove, and Andy cried for her daughter, unwilling that the young girl was to follow Mac like she herself had always done. The dog, though, at least, was still buried out back in Great Falls.
Desert Plants

The sisters had started early in the morning, expecting the hike would take the day, but there they were, half a mile from the arch an hour after noon. The early September sun had tinted the backs of their necks pink already, and the sisters looked like members of a cult, with their dark hair and sunburned skin.

Messy bursts of sagebrush stretched from the sand; Tempe plucked a leaf, three-pronged and velvety, and rolled it between her thumb and forefinger, trying to imagine the medicinal or mystical powers that the shrub might boast. She bent her head back and closed her eyes against the sun.

“Artemesia tridentata,” she let roll from her throat. It was a name she recalled from high school biology. “My first born.”

“What, with Ty, you mean?” Susan had sat down behind Tempe so that her knees, on either side, reached up to Tempe’s ears. She began braiding an Indian paintbrush sprig, red as blood, into Tempe’s hair. “We aren’t supposed to pick flowers out here, they’re all clinging to precious life in this arid hell. But, you did it first, you with your Artemesia whatever. There,” she said, sliding a pin onto the paintbrush stem.

“I barely know Ty,” Tempe said.

“Yeah,” Susan nodded. “None of us really do.”

In August, Susan and Tempe had driven an hour north of the city for the wedding. The guests were skinny men in their nicest jeans and untrimmed mustaches,
girls whose eyes were beautiful but looked drooped and tired; guests with dark, fresh tattoos on their skin; guests who were so excited to be at the age of independence that they had not yet begun to notice the subtle frays on the edges of their clothing. They were Susan’s peers; Tempe's relative youth felt heavy to her like words caught in her throat.

Tempe had agreed to attend the wedding with her sister because, now that neither of them lived at home anymore, they had adopted each other as guardians. Home, with their parents—their young mother and strong-palmed father—was where they had scarcely spoken. Alone now, adrift in a milieu of coffee shops and art house cinemas, they were sisters.

Susan worked at Nobrow, where customers would come to admire her pretty hands work the espresso machines. Tempe had seen people watch her sister, the strange object of their brief adoration. It was like watching a spider spin her web. Susan’s thin fingers, some with fragile triangles tattooed at the knuckles, tapped quietly on the metal kitchenware. She seemed to know the exact tilt of her head required to keep her forehead away from the steam. Tempe had begun to loaf at Nobrow often enough to play Susan’s coffee brewing dance in her own head and to recognize a good number of the strangers there.

At the wedding, he had been sitting amid a collection of cacti, guarded by their spines. The plants stretched arms upwards in a variety of heights, some of them holding pink flowers or orange or red and yellow.
From a distance, he had looked like an older guest, a father or uncle. But Tempe had seen upon approaching him in his cactus lair that he was not a hoary old man but a young one with white salt crystals in his hair. His jaw was square and stubbled. He did look older than Tempe, but because he was alone he seemed less like a stranger. Salt clung to his eyebrows and temples, catching tiny lights like facets of a gem when he turned his head up to Tempe.

“Are you enjoying the wedding?” Tempe asked, looking for a place to sit but there were none except the seat he’d found. She swept a small potted succulent aside with her toe and sat on her heels. The young man nodded.

“How do you know Emiko?” she asked.

“Work,” he said.

“She looks beautiful, doesn’t she?”

The young man nodded again. His cheek brushed a cactus arm and its whole body shivered. Tempe noticed a red hue to his eyes and nudged him with her elbow.

“You got the cryp?” she joked, using a term for weed that she had once overheard at Nobrow.

“No,” he said and pointed to his eyes. “It’s from salt water.”

“Oh,” Tempe said.

>Your eyes are very green,” he said.

A handful of tiny pebbles rained upon Tempe, striking her in the cheek. Susan’s laugh was like a bark and she grabbed her sister by the hand and pulled her from the cactus garden. “I need you. Come.”
With only one cactus spine swiping against her shoulder, Tempe escaped the small garden, tipping her head slightly to Ty.

"What's wrong?" she asked her sister.

"Nothing. Well, Shan's here, but whatever."

Tempe scanned the area; Shannon, whom her sister had left about two months before, was having a drink by a crowd of potted ficus. Tempe had always been jealous of that catch. Shan had a knack for convincing a girl he was listening, gripping to each word. A tattoo spelling "Susan" curled into his rib cage under his left arm, but Tempe couldn't see it now because he was dressed up nice. "Too skinny," was what Susan had said when it ended, but they had been together for too many years for Tempe to have believed her sister's excuse. Shan waved at the sisters but they both looked away. Tempe was too young to drink but she took a bottle when it was handed to her: Acapulco Gold, from the local brewery.

Tempe kissed Emiko on the cheek after her sister had done so. Emiko was sweet and had a small gap in her teeth that she tried to hide but rarely could. Her wedding announcement hadn't been a surprise, but Tempe did not expect her to be the first one to hitch herself to a man. Really, it was Susan she had seen all along as the curiously young bride, like their mother had been. Tempe and Susan were similar, especially in the way they looked, though Tempe had always been the one to receive compliments about her eyes; Susan's duller hazel used to tear up in jealousy, though more often now they would just roll. Tempe had been Emiko and Susan's doll in their adolescent years, a canvas on which to practice makeup. Her hair was always filled
with braids and plastic barrettes. The two of them, and Shan, were the only people Tempe knew at the wedding, but she did not like to latch.

"Who is that, in the cacti?" she asked the bride.

"Oh, Ty?"

"Emi," Susan said, shaking her head. She took a handful of Tempe's hair and then smoothed it down to where it ended at her neck. Tempe rolled her shoulders and departed, though she wasn’t sure where to go.

Much of the afternoon in the desert involved hopping from one spot of shade to another. The sisters had long removed their shoes, and the heated sand quickened their steps. Below a juniper, Tempe pulled a small cactus spine from her toe and buried her feet where the sand was cold and moist.

"Junipers always make me sick," Susan said, inspecting a powder-blue berry she had pinched in her fingers. "Too much gin when I was your age."

It made Tempe sad. There were no junipers in the city; she only knew them from where it was quiet and empty of people. When the sisters were very young, their father, who was as stout and blunt as his name, Mac, had taken them in the truck to the desert to camp for a few nights. Susan had scurried from the truck to a space of her own when they stopped in the desert, as she had always done, to avoid Mac. Tempe asked Mac if she could eat the berry she had found; it was small and hard to squish in her fingers, and her father had only shrugged. Afterward, Tempe filled her pockets with juniper berries, and when they were full, she fit the little blue fruits into the empty spaces in her shoes, to save for her mother. On the drive home, Mac
discovered the berries, as many had rolled out of her pockets to be crushed into the truck's carpet and seats. He stopped on the side of the highway and made Tempe discard the lot of berries while she wailed for her mother's gift. Once back in the car, Tempe realized the berries were still in her shoes, and she made sure not to move her feet in order not to crush them. When they got home, Tempe's mother was gone, did not return home for another few days. She had gone home to Montana, she told her daughters later, because she missed her own mother and needed badly to see her.

"Can you eat them?" Tempe asked now, pressing one between her lips.

"I don't know," Susan said, leaning back on the tree and closing her eyes. "I think they're bad for your kidneys."

"You mean your liver?" Tempe elbowed her sister in her ribs. She could see their outline; her sister was a skinny girl, skinnier than Tempe.

"No, kidneys. At least for pregnant women, I heard. What about your Artemis, or whatever?" Susan said.

But Tempe rolled the juniper berry around on her tongue anyway, letting it graze the inside edge of her teeth. She tested it between her molars, then spat it out whole. "Artemesia tridentata," she said. "It's just a plant."

By four, the sisters picked up their hike again to make it to the arch before it got dark and cold. They knew that what they would find would not be an arch but rubble; it had collapsed several years before. Now it was just two sandstone formations reaching out short of each other. Tempe picked a small piece of slick rock from below the dead monument, perhaps where the arch in its life had cast its shadow, and slipped it into her pocket. She tripped over the skeleton of a yucca plant,
its leaves still sharp as knives. A bubble of blood emerged from her leg and rolled down along her shinbone.

"Tempe," Susan whined. "Come back, you'll miss Emi's bouquet."

Tempe ignored her sister, but she would not return to the cacti just yet—her sister's concern about the man—Ty—had just barely frightened her. Emiko's grandparents sat on a bench by the door. Tempe had known them as a child. Emiko's grandfather had said so little to Tempe that she could not now remember his name. He wore, like he always had, a turquoise bolo tie that cinched the collar of his dress shirt. Emiko's grandmother was louder, eager to converse with her granddaughter's friends. She had once told Tempe and Susan about the barracks she lived in as a young girl for four years. It was the dust she remembered the most.

"Hi, Lucy," Tempe said, kissing the old woman on the cheek as she had done to the bride. She used the old woman's American name because she could not remember her Japanese one. Then she continued into the garden to search for some new plants.

Here, up north, was where the cement and gravel company men were digging out the side of the mountain range as if it were made of sand. The range grew thinner each time Tempe had driven by, traveling up to the northernmost states: Montana, Idaho; one time in secret to Canada to meet someone she had found online—he had ended up being too old for her and Susan and Shannon had to come retrieve her. They spent a week in Glacier on their way home, searching for grizzlies and assuaging
Tempe's deep disappointment and even deeper longing for someone "right" to hold onto. The quarry was beginning to create a dust problem in the valley.

Susan brought Tempe a plastic flute of sparkling wine in the orangery; Tempe was smelling a grapefruit flower and contemplating picking the unripe kumquat from the tree nearby.

"You say hi to Shan yet?" Tempe asked. Susan rolled her eyes. "You could say something."

"Are there any oranges in here?" Susan tried, scanning the corridor of citrus flora. Tempe knew Susan had understood her, but she wasn't going to try again.

"I can't find any. Emi and Johnny look great, don't they?"

"They do."

"You must be jealous," Tempe said, showing her teeth in a smile.

Susan barked her laugh. "I'm too busy keeping an eye on you. You're too much like Mom."

"What?"

"Ty's fine. Just, I wouldn't bother with him."

"No, but what about Mom?"

"Nothing." Susan escaped to a fig tree but Tempe followed, stepping on her sister's heel to slow her down.

"I'm like Mom?"

"I guess so, a little. Yeah."

"What's that mean?"
"It doesn't mean anything. Jesus, Tempe. We have a long drive home, can we not make it uncomfortable, please?"

"What's Mom like, Susan?"

"Tempe, stop."

"No, say it."

Susan folded her shoulders, looking as if she were shrinking before her younger sister. Then, in an instant, she grew taller, more formidable. "Mom made mistakes. She made stupid mistakes. Dad. Don't act like you don't know that. And you're younger than she was." Susan reached for Tempe's sparkling wine and poured the alcohol into the mottled soil of the potted fig tree.

"That'll kill it," Tempe said, but not loud, because she didn't know if it was true.

"We should go home. I'll go say ‘bye to Emiko. Meet you at the car." She left with the empty flute.

Out of the orangery, Tempe looked for Shannon. Approaching him would result in the desired fuming from her sister, but it looked as though Shannon had already left. He had shown tact in leaving before Susan had pickled herself enough to make a scene in front of him, though she was the one who had ended their romance. Tempe noted, upon exiting the exotic greenhouse, the dryness of the air of the parking lot. The cactus king, Ty, had left his succulent domain and was finishing up a cigarette beside a grey Ford Explorer when Tempe saw him. Susan's bark could be heard from behind, muffled only so much, suggesting that she was soon on her way out.
Tempe heard an ember drop, hiss on the pavement. The cactus king was less wordless in this second exchange, offering Tempe a cigarette and then the passenger seat. She had climbed into his car and was shutting the door by the time she heard her sister call, “Tempe, ready?” As they drove away, Tempe ached at her sister's long look as the car left the parking lot. Susan hadn't always voiced such disdain for their mother, just in the years since adolescence. It was Mac who had always been the nodal point of Susan's hatred; her desire to abandon him had been evident for as long as Tempe could remember.

The men that worked in the quarry during the day had gone home to have the dirt picked from their fingernails and shaken from sun-wrinkled skin, she supposed. Even in the dark, the quarry felt hot and Tempe was alert to the dip in her back and the spaces below her arms that were reacting to the heat. In a great swoop up the slope of the carved-out mountain, a wind tackled the two humans, who were trespassing, and deposited grains of dust deep in their hair.

"My dad used to work in one of these places," Tempe said, directing her voice to Ty but only because he was the only one around.

"Yeah?"

"A digger."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty. Why are you covered in salt?"

Ty studied Tempe, which she recognized as an oblique reason to approach. "I went camping at the lake," he said.
During a second hot throw of wind, both of them ducked behind a Komatsu excavator and waited for the gust to quit. Tempe closed her eyes against the wind and imagined that Ty might kiss her. When she opened them, though, Ty was already standing up and heading toward the car.

Tempe had licked a sagebrush petal and stuck it to her shin to stopper the blood. The little trident leaf soaked itself and dropped to the sand once it had had enough.

"I would have thought Delicate Arch would be the one to go," Susan said. It was late in the afternoon and Tempe didn't feel like listening to her sister's quips anymore. She was beautiful, but now, to Tempe, Susan was just a girl. Her job at the coffee shop was perennial and she made people caffeinated beverages as if she were serving them something stronger. Of course Susan liked that the steaming machine faced the bar because she knew her customers would linger at the register and allow their sightlines to follow her shape, the edges of her ribs and the sharpness of her shoulders and hips. How hard it must be to be gaunt yet beautiful, Tempe thought. And yet, right then, a job at the same coffee shop was all that she wanted for herself.

In Ty's truck, Tempe pinched dust from her eyelashes with the edge of her fingertips, careful not to let any fall into her eyes. It was a delicate move she had learned from her sister in applying mascara, to keep it from clumping. Ty was driving her back to Susan's, who Tempe was hoping was already asleep.

"Why is everyone so nervous about you?" Tempe said.
Ty shifted a gear, watched for a second as Tempe fixed her eyelashes. "Are they?" Tempe thought it was a terribly smooth answer. "Your sister doesn't like me?"

"She doesn't like our mom. Something about following the wrong leader, our dad." She slowed down. "I'm not twenty, you know."

"I know."

"I'm eighteen. But just."

"You're in high school?"

"Graduated."

"But just," Ty said and didn't say anything more as he pulled up to Susan's curb and reached over Tempe to push open her door. Tempe chose to sit for a second.

"You can tell me what's going on with yourself, or I can ask Susan. I'd prefer it be you," Tempe said finally. She left the Explorer and entered her sister's dark woodframe, careful not to wake any drunken sleepers, got into bed, and went to sleep herself. In a dream, she drew her wrists and fingers through clouds and clouds of steam but never once got burned.
Lincoln Continental, 1973

J. Blue wasn’t supposed to go into the desert that weekend—he had promised his girlfriend he’d pick her up Friday morning and drive down the coast to Rosarito, in Mexico. But on Wednesday, when he skipped Chemistry to have a smoke under the bleachers, his cousin Craig was there as if he had been waiting only for him.

“Hunting this weekend,” Craig said, offering a slender menthol to J. “You coming?”

“Where?”

“Out past Salton Sea.”

Craig was referring to the Chocolate Mountains. J. knew it wasn’t nearly the driest place on the planet but he had become dehydrated the last time he was there and had to sit in the backseat of the car like a dried piece of toast while the rest of the boys tromped through the creosote bushes with their guns. The thought of Chocolate Mountains did not make his mouth water but did make him feel slightly faint, his throat hoarse and dry.

“Yeah?” J. managed.

“Give that pistol of yours some fresh desert air.”

“It’ll crack the wood.” J. watched the girls’ physical education class do their stretches on the soccer field.

“You bring the pistol, we’ll call it even,” Craig said, referring to the lid of pot he had sold J. on credit. “We’ll need to borrow your dad’s Lincoln, too.”

“It’s my Lincoln. Now it is, anyway.”
J. was good at averting pedagogy, and when the final bell of the day rang, he felt no more learned than he had when he woke up that morning. His lungs felt tighter, though, and he was disappointed at having been lured into his cousin’s hunting trap. After school he rode his bike to his girlfriend’s house; her name was May, after one of J.’s least favorite months. He had been relegated to approaching her house from the alley behind it so that her neighbors wouldn’t see him. The house was two stories and hid inside it an embarrassing attempt at “modern” home decorating. His own father had never latched on to any redecorating fever, so, after J.’s mom passed, the interior of the house on Cedar Avenue remained cream-colored with billowing floor-to-ceiling curtains and the delicate floral couches that his mother had picked out before J. was born; it was classic and J. liked it very much that way.

May was a junior, a year younger. She was prim and never ran short of pencil skirts. J. was beginning a process of knowing less and less of May’s life because he was getting sick of it. She would gasp at the smallest runs in her stockings, letting the pretty little holes ruin her day; the zipper of her skirt was always centered perfectly in the dip in her back; her skin could only be described as immaculate and her hair was always brushed or braided without straggling strands. The only thing that marred her pristine aura was that she allowed riffraff like J. to climb through her bedroom window and into her bed.

May was not home when J. tapped on her window; nor was she in the living room when J. peeked in from behind a healthy cluster of staghorn fern. He waited for
fifteen minutes but no one arrived home. As he waited, J. fell asleep in the staghorn and was startled awake some time later, abruptly, by a blunt toe to his stomach.

May was mad that he had fallen asleep so conspicuously in the garden. As for J., his nap, though not long, had eclipsed the urgency with which he had arrived at her house.

“I needed to tell you something,” J. said, following May into the house.

“Okay, but it has to wait. I need to finish this essay before the newspaper meeting. I have to go back to the school at five.” May poured each of them a glass of water.

“It will only take one second,” J. lied, and pestered a long drawstring attached to the window blinds, making the light in the room quiver.

“I can’t, Jayjay. Go to my room, there’s some pot in my dresser,” May said. “You can smoke some, but please not all of it.”

J. was anticipating an overblown reaction to his cancelling their plan to go to Rosarito, so he was pleased at the chance to delay notification. He was intently disappearing down the hallway when he heard May again. “Open my window, though. My parents come home at six.”

There had been few times that J. had enjoyed May’s room in solitude. There were the times he had to hush and hide behind the door or under the bed when the front door opened and May would dress swiftly and greet her parents. There were fewer times when J. could roam, inspect, even speak or sneeze without fear of his volume. In a minute, he would roll himself a joint, but for now there were drawers and drawers of this girl to discover.
Her furniture was old, shipped from her grandfather’s home. It must have once decorated the rest of the house but now filled May’s room with a mismatched and overflowing comfort. A dresser the color of dark chocolate urged J. toward it. He rubbed his thumb along its grain as if an aroma of cocoa would arise, but he only picked up a line of quiet dust. The handles on the dresser were carved from the same hue of wood and each took the shape of a still life of apple and grapes. With only the pads of his fingertips, J. pulled open the top drawer. He was not looking for the marijuana especially but, beginner’s luck, this was the drawer containing May’s brassieres. They were sexy, even just as cloth and wire, piled unceremoniously atop each other, but to sift through May’s delicates seemed too juvenile, so J. shoved the drawer back.

In the drawer below was a field of wool and knitted things. Sweaters, both artifacts of grandmothers and new things with bold fringes and other embellishments. J. had seen May wear only some of these items. Her wardrobe existed as a much wider array of clothing than what her regular circulation of attire suggested. As with a philosophy, May seemed only to pick and practice the articles she liked, leaving the rest in close range in case she ever needed them.

J. plunged an arm into the drawer, reaching until the tips of his fingers touched the wood in the back. He had hoped that the drawer would never end, that he would reach so far in that his whole body would be pulled and swallowed into the woolen chasm like Alice into the rabbit hole. With both arms, he scooped up the contents of the drawer and dropped them to the floor, a perfectly grained hardwood cut from maple. Then he laid himself in his landscape of wool and unzipped his pants.
On his island in the middle of May’s floor, J. tugged at himself quietly so May wouldn’t hear, but the covertness of this particular operation threw him. He tried to think of May, Ocean May, wiping salt water from her eyes, pulling off a sweater, and adjusting the hems and strings of her bikini, but each image reminded him: he never did want to go to Rosarito. Leaving Long Beach, J. would venture only to those places where he couldn’t accurately locate himself on a map. Deserts, valleys; he would go for the wide latitude of the Mexican mainland, for instance. Coasts were too easy and Baja hung too soggily into the Pacific. J. wanted a wide belly of a landscape.

Before he could finish, a bird struck the window.

“What was that?” May called.

J. gave up; his cock had rejected his own tender attention at the sound of an avian neck bone snapping. He felt as if he was made of sand and he wanted to sift into millions of grains into the stitches of May’s sweaters.

“I’m going home,” J. said as he passed through the kitchen into the foyer.

“You can call me when you’re done with whatever.”

May slid her lower lip just slightly up against the top one. Those millimeters of altered features always revealed just how hard J. had struck her. But the bird’s smudge on the bedroom window had chilled J. and he needed to walk his body around to get it back under his control. He hadn’t noticed that he’d walked out the front door instead of the back until he was most of the way down the street.

Shotguns and rifles made sense for jackrabbit hunting and so they were loaded into the two trucks and the Lincoln Continental. The .22 caliber Browning pistol was
packed, too, but it seemed a strange fit for a hunting trip. It had been in J.’s possession not long and J. liked it better in its shoebox than in his hand. He preferred the slenderness of a shotgun, the way one rested against his collar like a weary head and how it felt so much like an outstretched arm to gaze along, lovingly, into the eyes at the end of it. The way J. saw it, though many disagreed, a shotgun was a poem, a pistol dumb and blunt.

Guns of any kind, though, were gifts that passed down the male lineage in the Blue family, perhaps like silver spoons and jewelry but even more innate, like the genes for brown eyes, attached earlobes, and quick tempers. The Browning had been J.’s most recent acquisition from his father in a continuation of what Mr. Blue called a “Western Sensibility.” This theme had first put a gun in J.’s hands at a young age, and the pistol itself had traveled at least a generation. Craig, who had green eyes and a widow’s peak, who wasn’t even a Blue but had arrived from J.’s uncle’s wife’s first marriage, had coveted the pistol from nearly the moment J. received it.

The boys left for the Chocolate Mountains around four on Friday morning. It was a caravan of two pickups and the Lincoln, which carried more people and, like the guns in the Blue family line, had been passed down to J. J. had told his father he was taking the car hunting that weekend, but didn’t care to mention that he wouldn’t be driving the car to school first. It was early but J. felt pleasant enough in the morning dark leaving the city. He liked March, the way heat would arrive by day and go by night. The spring air was crisp and felt wet even once the cars had made it into desert territory.
The sun was out by the time they had decided to stop for the day. The boys piled out and set up camp, littering the desert floor with green canvas tents, tarpaulins, camp chairs. J. hadn’t brought a tent; he always relied on others to offer him a spot under cover, else he would just sleep out in the open. There was nothing much to worry about except for scorpions and J. didn’t worry about those.

The boys drank beer and played cards to pass the rest of the day. Someone rolled a joint and passed it around; another was rolled and again and again. Wrestling matches were waged between the more inebriate.

J. was stoned, he was sure of that. The sand was beginning to bother him; someone had kicked a spray of it at him in operating a crossface pin. He wanted to wrestle but didn’t feel like moving from his space, as he was leaning against one of the smoother rocks in the campsite. He felt dry in the sun and grew nostalgic for May's cotton sheets, down pillows, frothy carpets, hills and hills of wool.

When evening rolled into the mountains, though, J. felt clear; it was as if the darkness sobered him and the rest of the boys. The guns, which had been resting like tired soldiers against the flanks of the trucks, were picked up and loaded. The boys who had come in their trucks climbed back into them, while the ones who had ridden in the back of the Lincoln now lined themselves up on the hood of the car. The caravan set off once again, a half-mile or so down the road, to where the crew figured the jackrabbits would be.

Craig had the shoebox at his feet but the Browning was out and in his hands. The box had been with Craig for most of the day, resting in his lap, the pistol inside
waiting for someone to give it some attention. If J. refused, it would accept Craig, clumsy and idiotic though so very enthusiastic, as a surrogate.

“Craig, is that loaded?” J. said.

“No,” Craig said, turning the gun over in his hand and sliding his finger past the trigger guard. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so? Is the safety on?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Okay, just stop pointing it all over the fucking place. Jesus, don’t point it at me, either.”

“Sorry,” Craig said and rested the butt of the gun atop his thigh. J. saw that Craig was still tickling the trigger.

“What happened to old May?” Craig said.

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t see her with you at all yesterday.”

“We broke up, I think,” J. realized for the first time, because he was not right now in Rosarito with her, nor had he told her he wasn't going.

“You upset about it?”

“No.” J. scanned the dark space ahead of him; he could point the car in any direction he wanted and drive for miles and miles. He didn’t care that his father might notice the scratches on the fringes of the car from dry desert brush when he returned. His view was only partially blocked by his friends who were perched on the hood, gripping the edges to stay on the slowly moving vehicle. It had grown almost completely dark since setting out from camp but none of the cars turned on their
headlights yet because these were reserved for startling rabbits from their rest. There was only a rim of red along the ridge of the mountain range.

It was a minor bump in the road but enough to unsettle the gun on Craig’s lap. It was the loudest sound J. had ever heard and the brightest moment. All of the cars had stopped from the gunshot and, for a moment, J. could feel nothing of his body.

“Craig,” he enunciated very slowly.

“I’m okay, I think,” Craig said.

“I think I’m okay, too.”

The boys who had been sitting on the hood were not there; they had been projected forth from the Lincoln at either the bump in the road or the abrupt stop. They were standing up slowly, brushing sand and prickly plant remnants from their clothing. The windshield was in one piece and none of those three boys appeared to have been shot.

“Did you shoot that pistol?” J. asked, not angry but lost.

“I thought so.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

J. had had, and would have, better hunts than this one. Back at camp he had searched for the bullet in the Lincoln but it was as if it had flown out of the car, whose windows were shut, with its own intricate flight pattern, leaving no trace but a momentary blind spot in J.’s vision after the pistol fired. He tried to sleep but there
was no room in any of the tents for him and it was cold out. He missed May and felt suddenly sick about leaving her.

The following day, J. awoke early and drove himself alone to the Salton Sea. He ignored the communities that hugged the edges of the lake and parked where it was clear and quiet. Soon, he was out of the car, then knee deep in water. Every year, he knew, the lake grew saltier. It killed the creatures that had lived in it for so long. It was a blue breath in a desert, but visitors would choke on the drink. Even the laps of water on J.'s bare legs offered no relief from the sand and sunburn from the previous day. J. had drunk no water yet, just the booze the boys had brought, and he hadn't carried any with him when he left camp. He was hoarse, growing horribly thirsty. He quit the lake and crawled into the bench seat of the Lincoln to sleep away the unbearable heat and irritation of the southern desert.

The light of day had changed when he woke the first time, briefly. He saw May, his head rested in her lap; she was sun kissed, her hair stiff with ocean salt. He woke again when the light outlined the mountain range far away, and he was alone. The metal dashboard before him still caught some light and J. grazed his fingers along its underside. There, he located a hole and figured, finally, the trajectory of the pistol's bullet.

J.’s throat allowed only rasps of words and he felt not only as if he could not speak the right language but that he had wandered into a place unknown and unmappable at the edges of the Salton Sea. The certainty of the bullet was a crutch and it carried J. into a neighborhood of trailers where he began to knock in search of fresh water. The first door that answered had been opened by a girl who seemed not
older than fifteen but looked to J. like May if she had been caught in a small but fierce sandstorm. The girl’s eyes were red and inflamed at the edges as if she had been sleeping or crying and she greeted J. with a look of apprehension. Inside, the light of the trailer was softened by dust in the air.

“May, may I have some water?” he asked her.

When the girl returned with a glass, many tears popped from his squinting eyes, sourced from a well that J. had not known existed.
Variscite, it was roughly the color of her eyes. That was the excuse he used when asking Tempe to join him in an amateur dig out west in Lucin. Her eyes as reference, in case he were to forget the color he was hunting. Ty was a rockhound now. He had started the hobby in the summer because he was always alone and already had the equipment: a geologist’s hammer and the loupe, passed down in a paternal line, hanging on a leather braid. He had already dug out in Moab and Zion—though he wasn't sure if he was allowed to. Tempe agreed to go with him, on the condition that they would take a break from digging and hammering to visit the Sun Tunnels, an earthwork by the lesser-known wife of a famous artist, because the next day was the winter solstice, when the moving sun would be captured in a concrete barrel, despite the impossible size of the desert sky.

He meant for the drive to be a chance for her to forgive him. A heavy palm meeting Tempe’s left cheekbone. It was still a little purple on the ridge. Above the bruise there was her short, dark hair parted off-kilter and soft like the fibers of a peacock feather. A sharp chin. She looked just like a young Nancy Holt, Ty thought: that artist who only seemed quiet because her husband had always been louder. Ty and Tempe had known each other since August, which didn't feel long.

After his girlfriend’s funeral, Ty had gone missing. He had disappeared for five days after driving north. He had stayed on the eastern edge of the Salt Lake, curling into the grass or sand on its shores at night. It was the day he returned,
smelling sort of fetid and covered in spiraling patterns of salt, that he went to the wedding and met Tempe.

Now they were driving southwest of the Great Salt Lake; the trip would take almost four hours. Lucin was once alive with train tracks, close to where the Golden Spike had been laid in its bed in the dry dirt and commemorated across the nation as the final stitch to sew the country together. The Transcontinental Railroad eventually lost its mystique, and Lucin along with it. The town, deserted and aging to dust, now provided only a sanctuary of ledges and nests for migrating birds. Ty and Tempe would have to dip into Nevada for some fifty miles before looping back around to reach the ghost town that sat out in the flats.

"The Sun Tunnels were made by Robert Smithson's old lady," Tempe said as if she were reading aloud from a book. She had tried before to coax Ty into telling her what had happened during his disappearance at the Spiral Jetty. He hadn't told anyone and was not intending to tell Tempe; this was because nothing had happened. The lake swallowed him and then hacked him back out the same as he was before. After a few miles, it seemed that Tempe had relented. "Her name was Holt," she said, in a defeated tone, but Ty already knew these facts. He let the rest of the drive go silent.

Lucin was larger than Ty expected. He had never been to an abandoned town before. Ty’s car doors cried and cracked when they were pushed closed, something Ty figured the heat and the cold did to cars as they aged.

An unexpected snowfall the night before had given Lucin more than a dusting, but maybe an inch, crusted by the morning sun. It was enough to level the ground and obscure the stones. He would uncover no variscite this time, Ty figured.
“Holler,” Tempe said, heading into the collection of old wooden structures, “you know, if you find anything.”

On the edge of the town was a box of slats, an old house. Ty watched Tempe pass through a yawning doorway, just an opening. Spooked by a town with only Tempe’s footprints, Ty followed her into the house.

Inside, the walls were speckled with bird droppings and the floor filled with gravel. Downy bird feathers—little ones—clung to splinters and imperfections in the wood. Dead birds lined the shelves and windowsills. Ty might have expected screeches, bird sounds, but it was silent.

“It’s a grave,” Tempe said.

Ty touched a strong feather to the bone on the back of Tempe’s neck. She stiffened, then pushed him away with a roll of her shoulders. He left her in the house; it was colder inside it than out.

There was truly no use hounding for any variscite, as the new sun had become obscured by a cloud ready to release another layer of snow. Ty leaned against his car and waited for Tempe. Finally, she emerged from the old house, approached the car, and began to inspect the geologist's hammer that Ty had left on the hood. She was inhabiting a background of his mind; Ty didn’t want to see the bruise on her cheek anymore. It didn’t seem like she had forgiven him yet, and he knew not what to do but remain silent and wait. He lit a cigarette. One rock jutted as if presenting itself to him and he plucked it up with thumb and forefinger. With his lighter, Ty melted the ice from the stone. Little melted diamonds. But he threw the stone onto the roof of the house before properly identifying it.
“There’s a gem farther out in the desert,” Tempe said as the discarded stone arced over the house of dead birds. “Much bigger than rocks. Let’s go there.”

The daylight was dead before they made it too far out of Lucin. Ty kept losing the road so he pulled over. It was only the day before the solstice, so they would have to stay the night in the car and wake up for the sunrise, when Tempe said the Sun Tunnels would perfectly embrace the light. They would drive the rest of the way there in the predawn half-light. Ty put the back seats down and wrapped Tempe in his coat, too tired and bored to remember to remove the things in the pockets first so they wouldn't spill out. They each took off their shoes and Ty lined them up next to each other on the dashboard. Tempe would not remove her own coat, though some object in the pocket protruded at such an angle that it was difficult for Ty and Tempe to arrange themselves together. Ty knew it was the rock hammer—he could see the wooden handle—but he didn’t want to ask her to remove it, nor question why she had it stowed in her jacket. The two lost their heat quickly, so wordlessly collected each other in their arms. Eventually, Tempe unwrapped Ty's coat and shared it with him. Her hair, short and soft like it was, splayed out, reminding Ty of a dark halo like those golden disks in Renaissance paintings of saints and apostles. When he wrapped himself about her, strands of hair were pulled into Ty’s nostril as he inhaled; when he reached to brush them away, his knuckles rapped against Tempe’s cheek.

“Ouch,” she whispered, and though she tried to suck her breath back in, Ty had heard it.
Ty was sorry for hitting her, but he would never say it aloud. She hadn’t known Clair, and was nothing like her, and Ty resented her for it.

Tempe shifted, turned over with her back against Ty. He felt himself stiffen and reached to her hip.

“No,” she said. Ty curled his forehead into the back of her neck like a dog that will be beaten.

A few minutes, enough time to pretend to forget her refusal, Ty's fingers searched under her shirt, upward, lingered. Tempe did not stir. Maybe he heard her blink. His fingers then went downward like dumb obvious travelers.

"No," she said again but Ty did not stop. He pulled her jeans from one hip, expecting her to lift her pelvis to help but she didn't. So he pulled harder. Then Tempe turned and kissed him. But it felt like a sad and desperate kiss, their teeth clacked together, and it only paused Ty for a few moments before he moved down to her neck, where he could feel her vein pulse. She tried to kiss him again but he didn't let her. He unzipped himself and fumbled to be inside her; when at last he got there, his right hand was clapped over Tempe's mouth, hot and steaming from her rapid breaths. Her halo of hair looked splintered, stringy and wet from tears and spit.

Ty's neck fell back when the geologist's hammer struck his head. Ears ringing, he could do nothing but let Tempe slide away from him and spring from the car. His hair was long and felt wet, as it was soaking up much of the blood. Tempe had not used the sharp end of the hammer but even the blunt end had opened the skin and seemed to have cracked the bone.
Once he could hear again, Ty lurched from the car, gripping the hammer, which Tempe had left behind. He needed a hospital, that was what he knew. Fifty yards away, a truck with a camper shell had stopped. Ty first saw it in the moonlight and then better when a door had opened and the interior lights flooded out. Those people would help him, Ty figured. Tempe was with them when he reached them, though; she was grabbing handfuls of another man's jacket. All of them remained in their footprints when they saw Ty. Tempe had run away without her shoes and her socks were bunched at the toes and soaking up snow. He continued toward them, the three men plus Tempe. His arm was streaked with his own blood.

"Holy shit, she did a number on him," one of them said.

Another said, "Stay back. Stop."

Though he had expected them to be older, Ty realized the men must have been around his age; their jeans were tight and frayed at the feet, the stubble on their faces purposely unshaven. They smelled like weed. He could not ask them for help. Ty ignored their warnings and pressed toward Tempe. One of the men tried to part them but Ty shoved back and wielded the hammer. Then he had Tempe in his grasp again, against the men's truck. Her hair was so feathery soft and her eyes, though swollen and wild and though he could not see their hue in the dark, must have still been green with zips of yellow. His desert girl.

Once, in the 1970s, a desert girl saved her own life by refusing a ride in a plane over west Texas with her husband, who died when the plane went down. That was Robert Smithson. Do you remember, he poured a kettle of glue down a rocky slope and watched the viscous liquid's slow journey down the hill? This Ty whispered
to Tempe. His fingers slid along the sharp end of the hammer. He touched the tip of her chin. Tempe had done some crying but her eyes now stopped fluctuating, focused on something beyond Ty.

"Blue, don't," someone said.

Tempe grasped the handle of the hammer, touching her fingers to his fingers. She looked at him now, a look that he wanted to mean she would envelope him, keep him and keep him safe. It was cold and the air unbelievably clean. Everything felt sharp. All of them, he and Tempe and the group of three—it was an impossible number of people in a desert, Ty felt, and it made him almost sick.

Ty saw that one of the men had a gun and when it rang, an emptiness screeched out through the desert.
Old Faithful

1.

They wanted to bury it. It was the first idea that came to mind, anyway.

Blue put the pistol in the wheel well, atop the tire, so no one would have to look at it. They wanted to bury the body but there wasn’t anything around to dig with. Soon, many others would be arriving to see the rising sun through the concrete tunnels, and Blue and the other guys couldn’t be around if the police showed up. Blue was on probation and wasn’t supposed to leave Idaho in the first place. He checked his coat and jeans for blood.

The girl had been splattered but they helped her wash it off her face with some snow. Noah had given her his coat. Blue watched the other guys, Noah and Ajax, fill their hands with snow and try to get the blood out of the girl’s clothes but it looked like the stains were going to stay. She had said nothing more than a few dazed thank you’s. The man Blue had shot had been wielding a hammer or an ice pick, something menacingly sharp, and was going to kill the girl.

Realizing that they couldn’t bury the body, the three of them finally agreed to lift it and shove it into the back of the truck. Ajax had a camper top on the back and he had built benches inside, below the windows, that opened like trunks for storing skis and climbing equipment. They emptied a bench and closed the body inside it. They covered the smears of blood with a couple blankets. In the other bench was hidden a kilogram of coke, which they had picked up along the way down from Idaho.
“What do we do with it?” Noah said when the three of them were done loading the truck. The girl had remained around front, leaning against the hood of the truck.

“We’ll figure it out when we get back home,” Blue said. “We’re not going to talk about it around her.”

“What if she says something…tells someone?”

“She’s not going to say anything.” Blue felt sure of it, though he didn’t understand why. He looked at her through the tinted windows. Her short hair flipped in the frigid breeze. The other two were also peering at her, Blue noticed; they were all fixed on her. It felt strange, so Blue clamped the back of the truck shut. She was very young, it seemed.

“We could dump it in the Great Salt Lake,” Noah said.

“It’ll float,” Ajax said. “Don’t you know anything?”

“Christ, then. What did you have in mind?”

Blue left the two of them and rounded the truck. They needed to get going.

“No one will miss him,” the girl said to him when he approached. They were the first words she had uttered since the shot rang out. Blue nodded. She pushed her hair behind her ear with a quivering hand and Blue noticed that her fingernails were short and bitten. In the distance, a small light shone. It was from the car she had run from. Blue didn’t ask her what to do but took the pistol from the wheel well, stuck it in the back of his jeans, and headed toward the abandoned car.

* * *

54
He was only starting to get used to having a gun. The Browning pistol had been his father’s. Blue didn’t know he still had any guns by the time he died. After the funeral back in Long Beach, Lynn, his stepmother, gave him the pistol in an old shoebox. *It’s not mine, so it must be yours now,* she had said to him. Blue didn’t know if he needed a license; in any case, he didn’t have one. He had tucked the shoebox under his arm and considered asking Lynn for some of the painkillers still crowding his father’s bedside table. She wouldn’t have said no, but neither would she have said yes.

Blue had gone into the garden instead and admired the large staghorn fern. It clung to an oak tree and Blue sat against it to be surrounded by the fingery leaves. He opened the shoebox in his solitude; on the inside of the lid was scrawled *Joseph Blue loves May.* Everyone had always just called Blue’s father “J.” Even Blue did. He realized that it was only J. himself who had ever held on to his full name. The gun in the box was small but not nice-looking. Assuming it wasn’t loaded, Blue peered into the barrel, wanting to see if there were ridges along the inside of it or what. But it was dark in there; he couldn’t see where the barrel ended, and he couldn’t manipulate the sunlight to shine inside the gun. Before he left for Boise again, he kissed Lynn goodbye, thanked her for the heirloom, and slipped some Percocets into his bag. The name on the shoebox lid remained in his head for a few days: *May.*

One of the passenger doors was ajar, which accounted for the light that Blue had seen from where they were parked. The back seats were pushed down and a men's coat was splayed out on them. They had started to sleep there, in the back, it
seemed. There were a few Percocets in Blue’s wallet so he took one, swallowing it dry. Though he had never encountered a scene like it, he was shocked at his ability to behold all of it, how his eyes could scan the strange vehicle like that. Amazing was his focus on obscuring his presence in that desert. He pulled his coat sleeve over his hand and shut the car door.

But he wasn’t done yet, he knew that. The girl wouldn’t say anything, he was sure, but the car would. Blue slid into the front seat and reached for the glove box. Inside was a flashlight, some rolling papers. He rummaged for the registration and the insurance; they were there but when he looked for a wallet there wasn’t one. There hadn’t been one in any of the dead man’s pockets either. He looked in the other nooks and in the discarded coat but couldn’t find anything. There was a stillness in the car; Blue studied the back where the girl had been lying down with that man, that haphazard sleep space. On the dashboard were her shoes, empty. He reached up and grabbed them. Then he slipped back out of the car.

Blue had in his coat pocket the hammer that his victim was wielding against the girl; he had picked it up before moving the body, before anyone noticed. With it now he pried the VIN plate from the car door, then the license plates, which gave him more trouble. He struck at the screws with the sharp end until they gave. He didn't see the wallet that had fallen to the ground from the back passenger door. Done, he carried the bits of identification he could find and the girl's shoes away from the darkened car; it was just a skeleton now, he thought—not even that light to brighten its bones.
The girl was with Noah when Blue returned. He was gently running a hand through her hair.

“Let’s go,” Blue said.

Noah sat in back with the girl on the way east. She was asleep with her head in his lap. He looked at Blue with a helpless grin but it was ignored. Blue was the one who had shot the guy. He should have been back there. Blue noticed an odd absence shock after shooting the guy because the Percocets had dazed him, made him focus only on the girl. He knew that Ajax was perturbed that they had missed the solstice sunrise in the *Sun Tunnels*, which was supposed to be phenomenal. It was the only reason he felt bad.

“Is she asleep?” Ajax asked.

“Think so,” Noah said.

“We need to finish this conversation. There’s a body in my truck. What do we do with it?”

“Nothing, until she’s gone,” Blue said.

“How about a lake, a big one. One that’s not filled with salt,” Ajax said and chinned the air at Noah’s reflection in the rearview mirror.

“There’s a lake in Yellowstone, I think, in Wyoming. I heard about it on this BBC thing. It’s got geysers that erupt underwater. That could help with the, you know, decomposition,” Noah said.

“Fine,” Blue said. He frowned at himself as he had noticed he was admiring a distant mountain range and beginning to tune the others out.
“I’ve got a family hookup there, on the Montana side. We can stay for a few nights. No one will be there.” Ajax said.

“Okay, Ajax. Just shut up,” Blue said and nodded toward the backseat. “We can’t let her know anything more.”

“Okay. Okay, Noah?” Ajax said.

“Okay.”

A few dozen miles down, Ajax piped up again.

“Why not just throw it in a geyser?” he said.

Noah laughed. “Why not just carry the thing right up to Old Faithful, drop it in, and watch her blow?”

Ajax laughed this time, which was like a roar. The girl sat upright.

“We’re outside Tooele,” Noah told her. “Sleep some more, I’ll wake you up when we get to the valley.”

“Did you take him with us?” she asked.

Blue frowned to himself again. *Him.*

“We’re going to take care of it. Just sleep,” Noah said.

She didn’t sleep. She rested her head against the window and watched the road until they drove into the city. By then, Blue felt straight again and felt a nervousness overcome him. He thought he could smell the body but didn’t want to bring it up in front of the girl. “H Street,” she said and they took her there. She carried her shoes with her instead of putting them on. Noah walked her to the front door.

Blue watched him touch the small of her back, so he looked forward, down the street,
instead. He felt like they were dumping the girl like a sack of trash but he had to hope that they would never see her again.

“She asked me where we were taking him,” Noah said, climbing back into the truck.

“What did you say?” Blue asked.

“Nothing. Up north. She won’t say anything; you said so.”

Blue didn’t know anymore who to believe. He shifted in his seat, feeling the pistol align with his spine.

2.

At forty degrees below zero, Fahrenheit and Celsius match; it was a fact not yet observed by the travelers but imparted by the BBC nature documentary that only Noah had seen. The short December days were soon to be accompanied by an excruciating chill. There were four travelers, all from Boise and all unaccustomed to the massive cold of the wide Wyoming caldera, a volcano still sleeping after all these years. Yellowstone’s winter was so white that it would cleanse even Noah.

He had always tried to like the idea of a road trip. This was his first one, but had been extended unexpectedly. He wasn’t trying to ignore the body and the kilo of coke in the back of the Ajax’s truck, but it was the best he could do to keep still his nerves just to look forward to the national park. Immediately, Noah had agreed to go to the cabin at Yellowstone, had even suggested it, not anticipating that in that sort of cold, the pipes in the cabin would have been drained, lest they freeze and burst. Their initial attempts to join a gathering of artists in a frozen desert in Utah were interrupted
by something dark, so they had driven back through Boise only to hastily regroup and repack and then continue on the road to Yellowstone. They had helped the girl, and Noah felt good about that. But now they had to go to great lengths to help themselves.

"It ain't called Big Sky for nothing," Ajax said before tilting a bomber to his lips. He was driving with his knees. The beer made Noah only slightly nervous but he did not protest because their car was the only one on the road. Ajax had a real name that was anyone's guess. Ajax was an outdoorsman who could drink a growler in a single night and who walked strange because of ingrown toenails. Noah had met Ajax and the rest of them at a bar in Boise where he managed to hold a job. And there was Blue, who had only just begun to carry a gun, but to Noah it was already as much part of his being as his widow's peak or the vertical scar behind his right ear. Maybe that was a birthmark.

Earlier, they had stopped outside a bar, a mess of logs on the side of the highway, after Ajax began to complain of blind spots in his vision from the bright whiteness of the snow. Noah heard the sound of a river some yards away from the bar but it was only a trickling, suggesting it was nearly frozen over.

As the boys stretched their bones and tested the frost of their breaths, a faint sneeze was heard that seemed to shake Ajax's truck just a little. The boys froze and eyed each other, passing accusations as to who could have caused such a silent noise. Another sneeze. Blue cupped his hands around his eyes and peered into the camper top.

"Jesus, God."
"What?" Noah said, beginning to feel a freeze on his lips. Ajax had gone around to the back of the truck already and unlatched the door.

"What the hell?" he said. It wasn't until he said her name, Abel, that Noah rounded the truck to look inside. Sitting up in the back on one of the benches, wiping her nose on the back of her hand, a covering of quilts slipping from her shoulders, was the girl Noah had been sleeping with. She was a backburner girlfriend, though, everyone called her that. Not a girlfriend, really, Noah thought, because he surely was not her only man. But in knowing her longer and longer, the idea that she was just someone to go to bed with seemed more and more wrong.

Noah sat in the back seat with Abel for the rest of the way because no one wanted her sitting in the bed of the truck anymore. He was bitter that he no longer had the front seat, in which he could cram his toes against the heaters; that was occupied by Blue now, who had been like petrified wood ever since they had discovered her in the back. Noah leaned into her.

"What were you thinking, Abel?" he said, tilting his head toward the back of the truck, where she had stowed away.

She squeezed his hand but Noah could only see her eyelids and a half-moon sliver of her irises as she looked down at their intertwining fingers. She had the darkest eyelashes he had ever seen.

"Ellis found out I've been sleeping around," she said. Ellis, she had previously claimed, was not her boyfriend, but later, when Abel began to warn Noah of Ellis's growing suspicion, Noah felt a fear that could only rise from guilt. But, in a way, he
liked that guilt, and he didn't like Ellis. "I thought I'd give him some space. When I saw you all packing up to leave again, I hopped in. Anyway, I thought you were supposed to be coming home but y'all split pretty quick."

"You should have asked me," Noah said.

Abel tipped her head at the front seats and lowered her voice. "I didn't think they'd let me."

"You're damn right," Blue said, still looking forward.

"Not too cold back there for you, then?" Ajax bellowed. He squinted his eyes into the rearview mirror. Noah couldn't tell if he was looking at him or at Abel.

"Pretty cold," she said. "But I was asleep most until you stopped."

The cabin, in a huddle of others, surprised Noah and the other travelers with its imposing size. It was tall and boasted a wide, open front deck, but it was still just a cabin in that it was empty and made of wood. A concave satellite dish dangled by a wire from the roof. The last residents of the swarm of cabins had left, perhaps two months earlier, for more temperate destinations, and the snow they left behind would still be there in the spring. Ajax did not have a key to the door.

“I’ll check around back,” Ajax said, his voice cracking through the cold. He had already begun around the cabin; the snow reached up to his waist, even on him, in the deepest parts. “Don’t worry about me!” he shouted again, waving his wool hat like a cowboy on a bronco. He rounded the corner, leaving only a messy path in the snow to indicate anyone had been there.
Noah watched Abel, a patient girl, take stock of the cabin before them. She walked along the tire tracks, departing from Noah and Blue. Her shoes, leather skimmers, would not withstand the weather and Noah began to worry about how long they’d all be away from home. Though he knew not much of her, Noah had become accustomed to Abel’s presence. He had liked her quiet daring, in the beginning. But now she was like a deer running headlong into a boiling blue geyser.

"Sorry," Noah said to Blue, who was leaning against the back of the truck, tilting his torso at a strange angle, Noah knew, because tucked in the back of his waist was the pistol. He was smoking a cigarette though he had complained earlier of running out of them. "I really didn't know she was back there."

Blue pushed a breath of smoke from the side of his mouth and deposited the dying cigarette at their feet, the ash spreading like dirty snowflakes across Noah's boots. The ember burned a tiny crater into the snow. Noah could hear it hiss. Blue had corrected his posture and pushed past Noah with a strong shoulder. They had lived in the same house in Boise for nearly a year, and although Noah had gotten along with Blue, he had never tried to get to know him. Blue was inward and calm, and yet his sudden violence in the desert felt expected.

Noah looked at Abel again, who was clutching her elbows and looking at neither him nor Blue but still up at the cabin. In the indelible frost, Noah began to notice how the cold muffled sound, and when Ajax kicked in the back door it only sounded like a twig snapping.

Blue, Noah, and Abel followed around the cabin, stepping in Ajax's footprints to make it through the snow. Noah heard Ajax release a primal shout from inside and
when he made it to the splintered doorframe, he saw Ajax taking up the still space
with his build and voice. The cabin had trapped inside it a frozen air that hadn’t been
disturbed in months and it seemed that the intrusion of the travelers was unsettling the
dust from the cabin’s cracks. Even indoors, Abel shivered. Noah thought of rubbing
his palms over her thin arms but he reached out, instead, for the knobs on the old
stove in the kitchen. There was a hiss of gas but the burner did not spark. Blue pushed
Noah aside and pulled a Bic from his shirt pocket.

“Careful,” Noah said and received a sharp look from Blue. As Blue flicked his
thumb over his lighter, a plume of flame erupted from the stove, consuming his hand,
then quickly died.

“Fuck,” was all Blue said, dropping the lighter to the floor.

The burn didn’t look bad but Ajax wrapped Blue’s hand in a thinning kitchen
towel anyway. Noah retreated through the broken door to retrieve supplies from the
truck and, to keep Abel from following him, gave her his coat and warned her that if
she lost warmth now she would never regain it.

Ajax was the one finally able to work the stove. He heated a few cans of chili
over the flame but the draft in the kitchen made it impossible for anything to stay
warm for long. Over their lukewarm meal, using borrowed plates and spoons, the four
travelers made a plan to drive into the park the next day and see the frozen lake. They
made it seem like it had been Abel's idea, who had pulled some maps and guidebooks
from the bookshelves and pored over them during dinner, though it was Noah who,
having seen the documentary on Yellowstone, had a better sense of the geography of
the park than the rest of them.
The cabin had three bedrooms, two upstairs and one beside the kitchen. Blue, who had shown little response to the cold, took the room downstairs, the one closest to the busted door they had managed only to almost close. Noah claimed the one with the larger bed, enough room for both him and Abel.

Noah was ready for sleep when someone knocked.

“I need to show you something with the stove,” Ajax said through the door.

In the kitchen, Ajax crossed his arms and leaned against the counter.

“We could leave her here for the day,” Noah said.

“It’ll be too cold for her. We’ll have to take her with us. She already thinks she’s coming, anyway.”

“Okay,” Noah shrugged. “So?”

“So you’ll have to explain it to her. Got it?”

“Yeah.”

Under a covering of quilts, Noah nestled his head into the crook of Abel’s back. He was lucky, she was warm and he was sensitive to low temperatures. He clutched her more tightly than he ever had, perhaps merely to earn her heat but he had his mind on the girl in the desert with no shoes on. A girl as quiet as Abel. Then he dreamt, not of desert but of the gruntings of bison, the sound of steam, noises he had heard in the documentary. When he awoke, it was still dark; he had not slept for long but he was alone. He had noticed Abel's absence because he was cold. The door clicked, and Abel crept back into the room.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.
Abel slipped into the quilts again; she was wearing only Noah’s T-shirt.

“Nothing,” she said.

When Noah woke in the morning he was warm and not alone. Abel was a slender lump below the blankets; only her locks, tangled from sleep, and one hand, with three silver-colored rings on three separate fingers, was not covered.

"Abel—"

But she was asleep.

"Abel," Noah tried again, pressing his thumb against the vertebra where her neck ended and her back began.

"Hmm," she said, jutting her elbow back to push Noah away, but she missed.

"Where did you go last night?"

"What?"

"I said, 'Where did you go last night?'"

"Bathroom."

"But we didn't turn the water on," Noah said.

"I know. I went outside."

"In your bare legs?"

"Yes, Noah."

He ran his thumb down the rest of Abel's spine through the T-shirt, then turned onto his back. Though she was usually a patient girl, she was not patient now. Her curtness this morning was like an angry dog's bark, and all Noah could do was retreat.
"Noah," she said, after trying to sleep a few more minutes. "Why is there blood in the back of Ajax's truck?"

Noah pretended to yawn. "Blood?"

"A blood stain, yeah. On the floor."

"Ajax hunts," he said, though he said it too quickly.

The gate to the park was closed for the winter. A ranger first peeked out of his post then emerged, bundled. He stood there as if waiting for the car to approach but Ajax pulled the keys out and locked them into his fist.

"Go see what he wants," Ajax said, jutting his chin toward the ranger. Without even being presented with a handful of sticks to draw, Noah knew he'd continue to pull the shortest—it was his fault Abel had come uninvited. And she was about to get in the way. So Noah opened his door and trudged toward the ranger.

"Park's closed?" Noah said, still approaching.

"Park's closed to cars, son," the ranger said. Only his eyes could be seen, a woolen scarf wrapped around the better part of his head, reaching up to his brimmed hat. Noah could see into the park now, a vanishing corridor of pines, new ones that had grown since the last fire. He could run in, make a break for it, but he didn't know how far the geysers were and the ranger would probably overcome him. Noah smoked too many cigarettes, especially lately, and he rarely had anything to run for until now. Making a break for it wasn't going to fix anything, anyway.

"Foot traffic?" Noah tried, though he knew his caravan would protest.
"If you want," the ranger said, "you can take a snow cab to the Old Faithful Lodge and stay there for as long as you can handle it. I'll get you a schedule." The ranger pivoted and entered his post, leaving a toe out to keep the door open. Noah did not wait for the schedule but hustled back to the car.

"No, thanks," he shouted over his shoulder, almost forgetting to finish the interaction. When he closed himself into the truck again, the rest of the travelers remained quiet. Ajax was glaring forward, gripping the steering wheel with more deliberation than Noah had seen him ever do while driving, even in a storm. Blue looked angry for having to sit in the back with Abel, but Noah had made a case for needing the heaters up front: he had given his coat to Abel. Abel tilted her temple against the window.

"Can't drive in, obviously," Noah said. The cold had made his jaw slow and his words were slurred. "Have to take a snow cab."

"Forget it," Blue said. Ajax nodded.

Noah buttered a square of toast, though it still tasted like a leaf of paper. After a few quiet street blocks, the travelers had stopped at the first diner they found open. Ajax was the only one who looked favorably upon the breakfast menu of big game: bison and elk in sausage sleeves. Noah bought Abel a scone and brought it to the table. Most of the breakfast pastries had looked dense and floury. Blue took only coffee, black, and a couple pills he had stored in his wallet.

“ Aren’t there any geysers outside the park?” Ajax asked.

“None that aren’t spa resorts, I don’t think,” Noah said.
“Lakes?” Ajax tried.

Noah could only think of the little ponds he’d seen surrounding the cabin community. Those were probably man-made and shallow and would likely be hand-stocked with fish as soon as the ice was gone. Noah had begun thinking of the park in order to force out thoughts of the girl in the desert. The more he thought of the park, though, the more it worked, and in that café, he had briefly forgotten about what they had stowed in the back of the truck. But the time he had spent envisioning himself in the kingdom of Yellowstone was wasted; the bison, the wolves, the geysers, all of it was inside and Noah was stuck out of it.

“The river from yesterday,” Blue said. He had been studying a map of Montana tacked to the wall. Then he peered into his coffee mug as if he were reading his own fortune. “The Madison?”

They were expecting to reach a turn-off for a parking lot, a docking sight for fly-fishing floats in the high season. Noah was directing Ajax with a map for fly-fishers that he had snagged from the diner. It was hard to tell how fast they were driving when everything was white but a whistle from Noah's window, which couldn't roll up all the way, suggested a dangerous velocity. Ajax had only slowed the vehicle as they passed something dead on the edge of the road. Its ribs were exposed, not even bloodstained anymore. An antler was broken in half. Two turkey vultures flapped away and landed again on the dead elk as the truck departed.
It took another half hour to get to the lot. Ajax parked the truck where the asphalt diminished into a mound of snow, some one hundred yards from the parking lot. The river could not be seen.

From a small packet he pulled from his breast pocket, Ajax pinched a dusty amount of coke, outstretched his palm, and deposited the dust into the crook between left thumb and wrist. He snorted it through his left nostril and wiped the inside corners of his eyes with the back of his clean thumb.

"Healthy," he said. He took another pinch, then offered the packet to Noah.

"No, thanks," Noah said. "Makes me feel cold."

Ajax passed the packet behind him to Blue, who took a good pinch. They all waited in the car for a while. Ajax turned on the radio but left it tuned to static. Abel was resting her head against the window again.

“What the hell is…?” Abel said, the end of her sentence curling back into her throat, evidently, when she knew. Ajax and Blue were pulling the body from the back of the truck. Back in Boise, it had been shoved into a military-issued duffel; the length of legs that did not fit was wrapped in black plastic. Though he knew it was there all this time, Noah was shocked to see the body again and surprised that Ajax and Blue had simply started unloading it.

Abel had started to move away from the truck, but the snow reached up to her knees, and she was fighting for balance.

“Keep an eye on her,” Ajax told Noah.
The two, Ajax and Blue, carried the thing away like a rolled-up rug on their shoulders, disappearing toward the river and leaving Noah to try to mollify Abel. She had packed nothing with her so Noah had not only given her his coat and sweaters but had also wrapped her in a blanket from the cabin. He was cold without his coat, but it didn’t matter because she looked so pretty to him right then, bulging and warm with pink nose. He had done nothing before to keep her safe like this. She started to cry, and Noah, fearful that the drops would freeze on her cheeks, yelled for her to stop it. A car passed by, and then another few, each one slowing down at the sight of two humans in the cold. Noah had to motion for them to go ahead, they didn't need help.

“I really didn’t mean for you to see that,” he shouted to Abel when they were left alone. His voice was loud and sounded more severe than he wanted, so he approached her, hoping she would not keep lengthening the distance between them. She stayed in place.

“Listen, it wasn’t me. It was Blue.”

“I don’t want to hear any of this. I want to go back. I want to go back.”

“Ice was a foot deep or something. We had to put the thing behind a log. It’ll melt, yeah?” Ajax said to Noah, who sensed the nerves in his friend's voice. It was strange. “Ice’ll melt, he’ll sink, we’ll be cool.” It had taken the two over an hour to return to the car and each of them had white blotches growing on their faces. Noah and Abel had been waiting under the camper top, wordless and cold, and emerged when the two had returned.
“Get in the car, man. Your lips aren’t red anymore,” Noah said. He opened the door for Abel but Blue pulled her back by the hood.

“You tell anyone about this…”

“Shut the hell up,” Noah said.

“Don’t think I’m kidding—”

In the car, Noah massaged the knuckles on his right hand. He hadn’t punched the way he was supposed to, and the cold had made his bones frigid. He thought maybe the fingers were broken. Leftover blood was crusting around his nostrils. Blue was sleeping in the front seat, Ajax having given him a Xanax to calm him down and assuage his broken nose. Noah had seen him pop another pill from his wallet, too. It was five in the evening and already dark, and all Noah himself wanted to do was sleep, but Ajax had committed them all to a round of his barreling voice.

“A while ago,” he was saying, “there were these young park rangers in training who went for a swim. Our age, I think. And supposedly they were drunk, I guess. But they knew about this place where a hot spring flowed into the Yellowstone River. And so they dove in, thinking the spring would have warmed the river water, but it was too hot and they all boiled to death.”

“That’s a fucking lovely story,” Noah barked.

“Back to Boise, then?” Ajax asked. No one said anything.

They stopped once more, in the town of West Yellowstone, and parked behind a grocery store. Blue threw a black garbage bag, which contained the license plates
and other evidence, Noah knew, into a dumpster across the street. Ajax and Blue declared their intention to find themselves dinner, but Noah followed Abel into a bookstore. She had been an English major, he vaguely recalled, and he would buy her a book that she liked. Ellis had never bought her anything, Noah figured, though neither had he.

Abel disappeared into a tower of fiction, and Noah vetted a table of Montana history. He looked for something that might contain the story that Ajax had imparted to the crew so he could see if it was actually true, but the books before him were filled only with lofty shots of cerulean hot springs or sepia tones of men wrapped in furs. He would ask the woman at the register. She had short and dark hair, like the girl they had found in the desert, but her eyes were not the same, they were dull. As he tried to approach her, a portly and pockmarked teenager was mumbling over a pile of books he had brought to the front but could not pay for. “I’ve wanted to read these for years,” he said.

The woman at the register, perhaps no more than five years Noah’s senior, smiled. Her nametag read Blasenka. She said to the kid, “There’s nothing better to spend your money on. But sometimes you must kill your dearest ones.” Her words were thick with accent, making Noah wonder how she had come to be in a place like Montana. While he waited, he scanned the shop but did not see Abel; there was a stillness within like that of the cabin before it had been filled with people. He pulled out three twenty-dollar bills and placed them atop the "dearest ones."

“It’s okay,” he said. “Did you see a woman here wearing a man’s coat?” he asked the employee.
“I saw her leave.”

The sidewalk had been shoveled, and Noah could not decipher which way Abel had gone. It was cold and the clothing layers that were barely enough in the sun were failing Noah now. Down the street, a discordance of roving red and blue lights pervaded the row of fly-fishing and T-shirt shops. Noah’s breath caught in his throat when he realized the lights were approaching the bookstore, but then they turned the corner—in the direction of where Ajax had parked the car.

Noah was the only living thing on that street, as far as he could see. The settled snow softened the light pouring from the shops that were open. He darted toward the entrance to the park, which was three blocks and a corner away, his lungs tightening with the cold. As he rounded the final corner, a hundred yards to the gates, he saw a snow cab’s engine grumble and push out a plume of black smoke.

“Wait!” he cried. “Wait, I’m going to the park!” His knees buckled and he tumbled into the snow. An orange door opened for him.

“Don’t you have any things with you?” the driver asked, once Noah had brushed the snow off and climbed to the door above the vehicle’s oblong wheel.

“My friends, inside the park, they got ‘em,” Noah lied and stepped into the cab. It wasn’t much warmer inside; when Noah hacked, his breath hung briefly in the air. There were five others in the cab, facing each other like in a train car, their frozen breaths mingling. One of them was Abel. She watched Noah with a look of horror; her eyes were wet.
Noah said nothing, and did not glance at her again. He looked out at the hills, covered in pines. Two hours later, still in the cab, Noah could see steam rising from the frozen ground.