THE MUSES: A NOVEL

by

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ABSTRACT

ELIZABETH SUMMER CRAIG. The Muses: A Novel.
(Under the direction of PROFESSOR BRYN CHANCELLOR, M.F.A.)

In the 1970s in rural North Carolina, in the shadow of Brown Mountain and its mysterious fabled Lights, fifteen-year-old Quinno Moore and his older sister, Gabrielle, are recent orphans, a situation made worse by Quinno's illness. To pay for his healthcare, Gabrielle implores Quinno to make a deal with a doctor to take his reclusive son on a hike up Brown Mountain. Joined by his best friend Kenny, Quinno and the doctor's son venture up Brown and discover a little boy, muddy and alone, in the middle of the forest. Unbeknownst to Quinno, a young woman on the other side of Brown Mountain, Judith Wright, lives in an estate and poses daily for an ominous sculptor known to her only as The Mason. The Mason intends to carve her exact image into a pillar of marble to display on his estate. Judith's memory is not trustworthy and with a lurking sense of unease, she pursues botanic wildcrafting, an interest instilled by her mother, and begins to see and hear strange things in The Mason's gardens. After his gardener disappears, Judith concludes that there have been more people roaming around The Mason's estate than she originally assumed. Who these people are, however, she is uncertain. As the mystery unravels and their stories collide, Quinno and Judith must reckon with harrowing truths about their pasts and take back control of their lives.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to the women of The Ranch—Emma Lynch, Britt Olson, Angela Nelson, and Aly Jordan—as well as Caitlyn Ross and Catherine Sawyers. We were girls together.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The Muses: A Novel

In the first chapter of her novel *Hamnet,* Maggie O'Farrell writes that every "life has its kernel, its hub, its epicentre, from which everything flows out, to which everything returns" (O'Farrell 9). I have decided that the kernel, or my first inkling, for my thesis, a novel titled *The Muses*, was born within a gynecology office. I had just been accepted into my graduate program, and I decided to celebrate it by attending to a doctor's appointment that I had put off for years. On the ultrasound table, I remember needing to use the restroom very badly, because when you seek an ultrasound and you are not pregnant, the doctors will insist that you fill your bladder to capacity. This is so that your full bladder may push your other organs aside and give the ultrasound tech a clear view of your womb. I imagined my belly like a round fish tank, full of mostly nothing, refracting light like a magnifying glass under the sun. A dozen or so tiny fish eggs floated at the edge of the monitor, and the ultrasound tech did not bother to hide her frown.

I dealt with my infertility diagnosis as I have with most pain: by pretending that the pain was not there. But after a while of trying to live essentially as a bachelor—who would never experience any living consequence from sex—the truth of my situation caught up to me. In reading Olive Moore's *Spleen* in my first semester of graduate school, I recognized that American society has a habit of treating women as a cohort of people who exist solely in a "pre-pregnant" state. This is to say that, from the moment those with a uterus are born, their lives are filtered through a series of direct and indirect mechanisms by which the central goal is always to eventually to produce a child (Moore). Little girls are given playsets to teach them how to nurture children while they are children themselves. Older girls are repeatedly threatened by the risk of teenage pregnancy through the mundane behaviors of showing skin and talking to the

opposite sex. Adult women are encouraged to treat the romantic relationship as a priority— not for its love, but for its potential product.

After reading *Spleen,* I realized that I was not a free bachelor but an outlier: something of a woman who is not supposed to exist within the American domestic and social framework. I also identified with the character of Leonora in Carson McCullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. I believed that society itself pursued me like the voyeuristic Private Ellgee Williams and constantly assessed my ineptitude at fulfilling the qualifications of a *normal* woman (McCullers). In addition, as the story of *The Muses* began to take root, I thought extensively of the feminist writers whom I studied in my undergraduate classes and whose work incorporated these ideas. The primary thematic influences behind *The Muses* include the many existing versions of "Blue Beard," a French folktale written by Charles Perrault in 1697. The general storyline of Perrault's tale involves a young woman who marries a wealthy man named Blue Beard. Blue Beard reveals that he has a tendency to murder his wives. The young woman comes across the bloody chamber where he displays the dead bodies of said wives and nearly becomes one herself. A team of the young woman's brothers comes and kills Blue Beard, saving their sister from his wrath (Perrault).

Several authors have reframed "Blue Beard" through a feminist lens. In developing my idea for my thesis, I intended to add to this repertoire of Blue Beard tales with my own version. In Angela Carter's version of the tale, titled "The Bloody Chamber," from her short story collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, the reader is offered an internal psychological view of a female protagonist as she attempts to supersede the wrath of her husband. Though her husband, the Marquis, offers her a comfortable amount of space in his home to explore, the teenage girl cannot help but poke at the edges of her fishbowl and see the world through her

individual lens rather than through her husband's. Eventually, she comes across the artistically displayed dead corpses of her husband's past wives. Her mother saves her from being beheaded by the Marquis (Carter). I designed the first protagonist of *The Muses,* Judith Wright, to emulate this notion of explorative feminine interiority, highlighting through her rebellious behaviors the ways in which a woman may resist the casual sexism that pervades domestic spaces and reappropriate the feminine identity to serve herself. I say "casual" sexism to refer to the kind of sex-based discrimination which may present itself in more subtle ways, such as through the subjugation of the female form in art.

The thematic development of *The Muses* was also inspired by Margaret Atwood's version of "Blue Beard" titled "Bluebeard's Egg," which presents well the multifaceted nature of casual sexism in American domesticity through the protagonist Sally and her husband Ed:

> Stupidity like Ed's can be a health hazard, for other people. What if he wakes up one day and decides that she isn't the true bride after all, but the false one? Then she will be put into a barrel stuck full of nails and rolled downhill, endlessly, while he is sitting in yet another bridal bed, drinking champagne (Atwood 32).

Similar to Atwood's character of Sally, I characterized Judith to navigate her domestic matrix with a skeptical kind of snark. Judith views her own proposed counterpart and *The Muses*'s antagonist, The Mason, as both emotionally malleable and a threat to her personhood. Though she does not remember the full scope of their relationship, she knows that he is in a position of power over her, behaving as her voyeur and her social conductor. Judith must overcome a considerable hurdle to obtain and maintain her own power: her fractured memory. She does not remember that The Mason was once her husband or that they have a child together.

To again call upon the themes of Moore's *Spleen*, I also designed the character of Judith to demonstrate how pregnancy and motherhood are used as a mechanism to reinforce the American domestic framework. Judith has been pregnant twice in her life, though only one of her children has survived. Judith's amnesia addresses the traumatic effects of post-partum depression after having lost her second child. Despite losing her memory, the remnants of her old life as a wife and mother circulate in her unconscious mind, reflected in her habit of seeing infants in flowers and recognizing pregnancy-related changes to her body. The Mason attempts to filter Judith's growing knowledge of her past life to serve his interests. He incrementally subjects her to small reminders—like her golden locket with a picture of their son—so that he may cultivate her personality to adhere to the identities of a dutiful wife and mother effectively.

In the relationship between Judith and The Mason, I also explore the perceived hierarchy intrinsic in oppositional relationships, such as “man versus woman,” “husband versus wife,” “materialism versus idealism,” and “art versus reality.” Judith’s days are spent posing on a freezing slab as The Mason labors to carve her image into stone; through this, I wanted to show how the American husband fails to wholly embody the American wife in the same fashion that art fails to capture material reality. The Mason is one-dimensional, with a finite and set perspective about Judith and the ways in which she should behave. He can’t recognize that his own personhood is as equally constituted by Judith as Judith's personhood is dependent upon his. At most, The Mason's obsession with Judith's subjugation is only able to produce her acardiac twin made of stone. He is akin to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s maniacal and oppressive character of Dr. Rappaccini from his short story “Rappaccini’s Daughter”: “As he drew near, the pale man of science seemed to gaze with triumphant expression at the beautiful youth and maiden, as might

an artist who should spend his life in achieving a picture or a group of statuary and finally be satisfied with his success" (Hawthorne 233).

Though the dynamic between Judith and The Mason was interesting to decipher, I recognized in these drafts that it was difficult to create a story between an unstoppable force and an immovable object. Therefore, I sought ways to generate instability between them. From this, the second protagonist of *The Muses* emerged: Quinno Moore. Quinno Moore is a character whose thematic background is inspired by true events from my father's childhood. When my father, Joaquin Craig, was five years old, my paternal grandfather abandoned him in a Colombian jungle after my father dropped their food—which they had fished—into a river. Joaquin ended up going missing for five days. During those five days, he made his way to the city of Bucaramanga, where he was adopted by a group of teenage boys. A doctor in the city eventually found Joaquin and took him to the American Embassy to find out who he was. My paternal grandfather worked at the embassy and my father was returned to him.

To make my father's story work alongside Judith's, I altered the setting and characterization of Quinno's perspective in distinct ways. First and foremost, I determined that *The Muses* should take place within Appalachia, specifically around Brown Mountain. Though I imagined in the earliest drafts of *The Muses* that Judith lived in this general area, I never actually specified it in my text. Prior to beginning my thesis, I had knowledge of Brown Mountain and its paranormal lore from trips taken in my childhood. Brown Mountain lies above what the Cherokee Nation refers to as the River of Cliffs, or Linville Falls. It is a place enmeshed with the cultures of both the Cherokee and Catawba peoples, whose oral histories have constituted much of Appalachian culture. The stories of their respective peoples depicted within *The Muses* are true and have been subjected only to the edits and biases inherent in their journeys across time,

and their mistranslation into the English language. I chose to incorporate the stories of the Cherokee and Catawba into *The Muses* because I don't think an "American," "Appalachian," or "Southern" novel can call itself such without addressing those nations whose suffering was instrumental in the invention of these particular terms.

In conjunction with the aforementioned influences of Carter and Atwood and Brown Mountain's recorded history of hauntings, I wanted my thesis to take on characteristics of the Gothic tradition and include the genre's traditional tropes: ghosts, the gothic hero within Quinno, the gothic double within Judith, and the notions of the abject and the grotesque within either of my protagonist's interactions with The Mason. In order to substantiate the gothic characteristics of my text, I relied on the expertise in characterization and world-building of writer Toni Morrison, who is renowned for her work in the Southern Gothic genre. Much of Judith's behavior was inspired by Morrison's depiction of Sethe in her novel *Beloved*. Sethe is also a protagonist who is forced to move through the world with a warped view of reality as a result of past traumatic events, particularly enslavement (Morrison). In mind of the distinctly Black history presented in Morrison's text, it was my intention to broach the topic of women's trauma within a white perspective with a respectful distance that honored Black women, whose specific experiences are compounded by the intersection of racism and sexism in the domestic sphere.

I recognized in early drafts of Quinno's perspective that it would be difficult to depict him as a five-year-old. Consequently, I determined that I would instead make Quinno into one of the teenage boys that my father found in Bucaramanga; however, in *The Muses,* he would be from the small mountain town of Newland, North Carolina, which is about a ten-minute drive from Brown Mountain. I decided to reinvent the character of the five-year-old to branch together the perspectives of Quinno and Judith, under the assumption that it would be interesting if Judith's

forgotten son with The Mason somehow ended up in Quinno's hands. From this, the complexity of Judith and Quinno's perspectives increased substantially and the structure of my thesis emerged. I decided that *The Muses* would alternate between the perspectives of Quinno and Judith. Their stories would first appear incongruent due to the stark differences in their situations. Threads of thematic continuity would bring their experiences intimately close to one another's before they actually interact. Judith's missing son, a red-headed child, would be their point of convergence.

With my father's permission, I constructed Quinno's character so that elements of his life would recreate circumstances similar to my father's childhood and to mine. Quinno lives with his older sister, Gabrielle, in a cabin right outside of Newland. They are in the middle of the Blue Ridge Mountains, with a crumbling front porch painted haint blue to ward off that region's paranormal superstitions. Quinno is plagued by ghosts, real and psychological, and he struggles to contend with their presence in his life while he suffers the debilitating effects of the same lung infection that took the life of his mother. He is also compelled by the haunts of Brown Mountain in particular, a place with a recorded history of spectral phenomena of which his best friend, Kenny Leed, has become obsessed. Kenny implores Quinno to join him on a trip to the mountain. This gives Quinno the motivation to recover from his illness and reenter the world. What he finds on Brown Mountain, however, makes painful memories concerning his family history resurface.

I wrote the earliest drafts of *The* Muses in a first-person point of view, with Quinno's perspective in an epistolary format. The pacing was quick, with Quinno arriving on Brown Mountain on the eleventh page. As I revised Quinno and dove more into his interiority, I found that I needed more groundwork to understand him before I could let him step foot on the

mountain. I learned that one of the most crucial elements in Quinno's story was acknowledging the circumstances with which an oppressive ideology may be cultivated within a boy who is virtually a blank slate; a potential proto-Mason. It was then important to address not *what* occurs, but *why* it occurs. I converted Quinno's and Judith's perspectives into a third-person limited point of view that would allow me to incorporate more detail as to the personal, familial, and social circumstances around them that would knowingly and unknowingly influence their decisions. To dive into Quinno's male interiority, I relied upon the demonstrated expertise in characterization and character interiority in Anthony Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot See,* which explores the character of a boy, Werner Pfennig, who follows a tragic trajectory similar to that of Quinno. Doerr's story explores, through beautiful prose that inspired my own sentence structure and attention to imagery, how a boy born into difficult circumstances may inadvertently become a weapon for a destructive ideology of which he is not consciously aware that he is a part (Doerr).

Additional influences on the thematic content of Quinno's perspective included Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*. *Blood Meridian* addresses the crux of Quinno's fate: the inevitable replication of acts of violence by those who, for one reason or another, make little to no attempt to slow its pace (*Blood Meridian*). Unlike *Blood Meridian,* however, which addresses male violence in a more general sense, *The Muses* explores how boys may be socialized into replicating the casual sexism and violence of American domesticity. Though my thesis has only included the preliminary information of Quinno's circumstances, I intend to have Quinno's later interactions with Judith's son, and later Judith herself, reflect a moral custody battle that is emblematic of the oppositional ideological relationship between patriarchs and matriarchs. *All the Pretty Horses* addresses this ideological divide directly, and it informed my characterization of Quinno and his resentment for his father in particular (*All the*

Pretty Horses). Quinno learns, towards the conclusion of my thesis, that he does not resent his father because his father was violent, but because he was not violent enough, according to what Quinno's society demands of men in service of their families.

One of the most rewarding elements of writing my thesis has been seeking the aforementioned threads of continuity between Judith and Quinno. I find that the relationship between Judith and The Mason has remained distinctly hierarchal throughout each draft of my thesis. Discerning Judith's comparability to Quinno in my revision, however, has been shocking and insightful. Thematically, both Quinno and Judith hold similar motivations for preserving themselves and their definitions of family at all costs. They are confronted with notions of fractured identities, mourning, troubled family life and history, and disembodiment. However, because of the differences in their starting environments and specific histories, these notions also manifest in distinct ways for either character. Quinno is compelled to define the boundaries of his identity and masculinity after having lost both of his parents. He struggles to keep his mother's spirit alive while contending with the troubling memories he has of his father. He is also forced to confront the looming threat of the Vietnam War and the effects the war has had on the development of his morality in conjunction with the society around him.

Judith, in turn, must define the boundaries of her identity after having been parted from who she once was. Like Quinno, Judith is also a blank slate. As I move forward in my novel, I can see her not only poking at the edges of her fishbowl, but shattering its glass entirely. I expect for her to fall into a tragic trajectory on par with Quinno. I see both of these characters spiraling like binary stars stuck in an ouroboros constituted by their love and violence: the love for their families and the violence they will use to defend those families. A central theme for *The Muses*, as I have finally found it, is the stitch between love and violence. Either is constituted by the

other, and neither may be parted from the other, ever. Not entirely. For Judith to find herself, she will need to love herself harder than she has ever loved any version of herself, and she must be willing to embrace her own violence to defend that selflove.

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CHAPTER 1

QUINNO

In their cabin twenty feet from Route 181 outside of Newland, North Carolina, his older sister squeezes a tattered wet cloth to his forehead, and the young Quinno Moore sputters awake. There is too much water and not enough, all at once. All in the wrong places. And it rains. It slides from his hot temples down into his ears, into his soaked pillow and bedding, and joins those tributaries which formed around the mountain of his feverish body and poured from the dip of his diaphragm while the moon was high.

He is drowning, Quinno thinks, through the humid dark. Or the warped ceiling of his small bedroom is leaking again, and has tortured him out of sleep. Or the steel roof has imploded and fallen on him—noiselessly—because something not only wet, but also heavy and cold, weighs upon his chest.

Quinno tries to suck in the fetid air, to calm his quickened pulse. The air in his room is too thin. Passes through his teeth like crystals in the pinched bit of an hourglass. There is no relief.

He is being crushed to death, Quinno concludes, and if he opens his eyes, he will see the narrow end of the Eridanus spilling itself into the spangled breast of Orion, and the roof beneath his chin.

But Quinno's room is fine. The ceiling is still intact, peeling yellow turned green in the early dawn, the unearthed tree roots of water damage sprouting in its corners. Next to him are his oak bedside table and matching dresser, both in their normal worn condition. His mother's framed silver portrait looks upon him dotingly under his lamp. His carved wooden dog sniffs the frame.

The crushing wet is all within him. Under a thick quilt embroidered with his family name, tainted spit stoppers his breath and plunges his lungs into an icy slurry.

His bed dips under his sister's weight. The slender figure of Gabrielle speaks to him, but her voice warbles, submerged by the churning of water and his erratic heartbeat in his ears. Her black hair sticks, in ribbons, to his bare chest as she dabs her soaked cloth to his face. Her eyebrows wrinkle and fret, matching the paint over their heads.

Quinno's ears pop, and there she is shushing him.

Gabrielle wrings clothwater into a metal bowl propped on her knees, clinking and full of tiny colliding icebergs.

An animal whimpers and digs its claws into his neck. The pads of its paws are hot on his skin. It takes Quinno a moment to realize it is himself: that it is his own nails digging for the slurry in his throat. He laps up the scant fuel of the air. Thrashes and twists his ribcage into something feral and unrecognizable.

“Gentle now,” Gabrielle says. She abandons her bowl and grabs for Quinno's hands. Lunges for them like they're slippery creek fish and cuffs them under her thumb.

Quinno kicks his legs. His mattress springs creak and groan. The threaded buck on his quilt rears. He tries to speak, but his voice is gravel, boots on crunching snow. A thing inhuman. “Time?”

“It's six. The water's heating on the stove,” Gabrielle says.

The pale blue light of the early autumn morning peeks out from broken window blinds falling off their rope. A fly buzzes and throws itself at a cracked pane. Gabrielle yanks the beaded cord of the domed lamp on the bedside table and her younger brother's heaving breast

shines in its orange glow. Moist baby hairs curl at his hairline. Quinno smells of musk, of the creek bed, and he gurgles.

He smiles in agony.

“I'll be a second.” The bed jerks. Gabrielle takes her metal bowl and hurries out of the bedroom to their kitchen-living room-dining room. Quinno's freed fingers resume their clawing. Gabrielle's bowl clangs in the steel bed of the kitchen sink. Quinno imagines his mother's floral iron pot on top of their rusted teal stove simmering more water to near-boiling. A knob clicks. The heat is cut. Wheels of drawers squeal. Something dropped into the pot echoes.

Gabrielle reemerges, mittened in the bedroom doorway. Next to his domed lamp, she places the floral pot onto a burnt ring etched into the bedside table, the oak scorched and leeched of its veneer. She throws the mittens and spoons a cupful of the pot's clear concoction into a wooden ladle. Holds it to his chin.

Quinno stays his thrashing and parts his lips. Accepts the full ladle. It scalds, on purpose, and rinses the wall of impurities in his throat down into the acid of his stomach. Melts some portion of the rime encasing his lungs and heart. He takes his first full breath and calms.

Gabrielle offers him a second molten drink, and he accepts. The well water runs raw and metallic on the now bare inner flesh of his mouth and he fights the urge to spit. He shouldn't. He can't. Quinno discovered this trick of the hot water about a week ago and he has endured it every day since. To breathe, to be. He can and will endure it some more. It is all they have.

He swallows and takes his second full breath. “You're gonna be late,” he slurs.

“I called off.”

Gabrielle stirs her nothing stew. Quinno raises himself on his forearms. Shucks the soaked bedding from his back. A copy of himself, the other half of a Rorschach printed in his

sweat, remains sleeping on his pillow and threadbare fitted sheet. Exposed, he can't decide whether he is too hot or too cold: whether he is too wet or too dry, or whether he wishes to have remained asleep, in faux tranquility.

He squints at his lamp's bulb and coughs harshly in his lap. “We can't afford that.”

“Yeah, we can. I asked Mrs. Hughes for an advance.”

“What about next week? The rent?” He swallows glass.

“Don't worry about it. I can get more hours.”

Quinno folds his quilt and sheets on his lap. Hauls his spindly legs to hover the carpeted floor. His brass bed frame thumps the shiplap wall. Upright, drips of sweat and grime run down his back and collect in patches on his undershorts. He shakes from the exertion or his cooling sweat or both.

Gabrielle gathers her dress closer to herself. Quinno recognizes it is their mother's. Remembers the raised ridges of the eyelet lace and flowers on its skirt at Easter parties full of other toddler children he didn't care to know. His sister's face. It is his own face, though hers has a softer jaw and more loving dark eyes. Matilda's eyes. His shame is unbearable. She shouldn't be here.

“It ain't right,” he says.

“Shush.”

Gabrielle spoons another gulp of water into the ladle. Holds a hand beneath the cup like the water is rare medicine. Quinno indulges in her fantasy and laps up the illusion of mint and root. Clove and pine needle. He considers, also, the real roots in the soil that he could pull.

Rent money.

“What day is it?” He wipes his mouth on the back of his wrist.

“Monday, September 25th.”

“Carter'll be clearing soon. I can ask him for work. I'm old enough. Make up for what's been lost.”

Gabrielle plops the ladle into the pot. “You can barely stand.”

Outside Quinno's bedroom window, the swift winds of the equinox thrust a copper wind chime dangling from a nail. Past the blue rotting columns that hold up their brick front porch's steel overhang is a shedding maple tree. Down a short gravel hill sandwiched by red dirt, the stark marigold line of a two-lane road marks the end of what's not really theirs. Beyond that, rows and rows of more silver maples and spiked white pines stand so tall and dense that one could convince themselves there weren't other people for miles.

But there is the little mountain town, Newland, and its five hundred and twenty-five residents waking up half a mile to the north—thrumming as a well-oiled and humble engine in the shadow of Spanish Oak. Parents wave to school children as they crawl up and down more gravel roads to their bus stops. A cook turns a knob and cranks the grill at the Tweetsie Diner by the overgrown railroad. A waitress dries and hangs her mismatched mugs. Some early risers make their way into the diner's candy cane booths and gossip about the trees, always a spectacle this time of year. Farmers and other workmen chain up the doors to their garages, and the grating of their saws and Farmall tractors wake up whoever else was sleeping. The Calhouns feed their chicks and count their boxes of bird and buckshot at their Farm and Hunting Supply. Mrs. Hughes uses a jarred candle to prop open the front door of the Quality Mart, but then decides against it, the weather a bit too chilly for her liking.

The Moores survive in a rented single-story on a desolate acre of land at the town's border, built by the family Carter in a year when Newland was still known as the Old Fields of

Toe. The recently widowed Matilda Moore had found the house in 1968 of boarded windows and chipped blue siding and made a second home of it for herself and her two children. Rented it from Rob Carter, an obstinate grandson of the Old South. Carter's main homestead is a two-story wedged into a fertile hill dotted by mature Christmas trees, and the naked branches of hobblebushes too tough to be chewed by his cattle, that healthy boys can be paid to pull, chop, or burn.

Quinno brings his knees up to his nose. Cups his elbows. “Legs work just fine.”

“I think that'd be a big mistake.” Gabrielle opens the drawer of his bedside table. “You decide on what you're bringing up Brown?”

Glimmering under the lamplight, the horn hilt of Quinno's bowie knife juts out from its red leather sheath like a canine from the gum. It had been one of two gifts from his maternal grandfather—whom he never met—before Quinno was born. The knife seems to Quinno as belonging to another time altogether: to that of the extinct copper-faced wranglers of the Old West. His grandfather was not from the Carolinas, and that is all he knows of him.

The knife skids to the back of the drawer. Gabrielle takes out a composition notebook. *MATH* is written on its cover, in Quinno's chicken scratch. His sister sits cross-legged on top of his quilt and opens the notebook to the first page, titled *Brown Mountain Necessities*.

“Thought you said I could barely stand,” Quinno says.

“For now. Tarp, rope, lighters. What about food? You and Kenny don't plan to eat, all along that way?”

“We might catch it.”

“Is that right?”

“You gonna pay for it?”

Gabrielle fiddles in the pocket of her dress and removes what Quinno recognizes is their father's cowhide wallet, smooth on its opening edge from the residual oil of Jamie Moore's fingertips. She plucks a dollar bill from the center fold. “Just our luck. This could get you a couple of candy bars.”

“Why do you got that?” Quinno turns up his nose and coughs. Mold and rot, and a bit of their father's tobacco chew, wafts in the air.

“I was sorting Jamie's stuff in the closet. I thought I might find something else we might sell in one of the ceramic dogs or his suit. This wallet could get us a good bit. Some real medicine, even.” Gabrielle balls up the dollar bill and shoves it into her pocket. A business card faded by moisture sticks out from one of the wallet's side pockets. She reads the card and slips it next to her dollar.

“You won't find nothing good in Pa's stuff. Take Grampa's colt.” Quinno points a knobbed finger to his dresser. The veins of his forearm are bright and evergreen, his skin striped by the rising sun raked by the window blinds. “And that knife. Take them to the Calhouns and help yourself.”

Gabrielle's eyebrows pinch. “Then you won't have nothing to defend yourself on Brown.”

“And what exactly would I be defending myself from?”

“Haints, Indian spirits, bobcats, black bears. Strange men.”

“None of them things bite if I mind my business. I fixed the colt up real nice. Should get you a decent chunk, since it's an antique.”

“It's our history.” Gabrielle purses her lips and tosses the wallet onto the floor. Shuts the composition notebook. She stands and hooks her thumbs into the brass handles of the dresser's upmost drawer. Arthur Fairbourne's Colt 1911 rests on a mound of Quinno's flannel shirts.

Over the last two weeks of his bedrest, Quinno had devoted hours to disassembling and reassembling the gun in his lap: to cleaning from the dirt packed in the gun's snakeskin grips to the gunpowder lodged in the many grooves of its firing spring. Maybe so that it would not fail him in the woods on Brown. Or maybe so that his sister might have something of worth when he was gone, if it got to that. The emulsion of white vinegar and gunpowder had stained his nails and the embroidered *Moore* of his family quilt black.

In Matilda's oval mirror hung above his dresser, an awful portrait of himself scowls at him from behind Gabrielle: the reflection jaundiced, eyes half-lidded. His hair is oil-slicked and matted down to the bumps of his protruding ribs, all the way to his hips. He can't believe how emaciated his arms are. He might dissolve right into the air.

Gabrielle pushes the dresser drawer shut. “You look how when mama died,” she says, reading his thoughts.

Quinno had heard Gabrielle tend to Matilda on her sickbed: the wringing of the water cloth and the filling of the bedpan. The dumping of the bedpan into the trees next to the porch and his sister's whispered prayers to the wind. He knew when their mother went to sleep or woke up by the thump of her bedframe and the bending of her mattress springs. And he knew the exact second, in the sudden silence after one month of her constant labored breath on the other side of the shiplap, when Matilda had passed in the middle of a night in July.

“Keep him out,” their mother said, rattling on all sides of her words. Outside of the cabin, everything had been in blossom. Swaying and orchestral. Quinno clasped his family quilt in the doorway to her room, its squares trailed on the floor as though he were much younger than he was. He couldn't find his mother in the stale gloom coloring her sheets, the bleaching moonlight

rippling together ivory hillocks of fabric and skin. A jealous Angel of Death, Gabrielle was of no help: perched in one of the kitchen chairs next to their mother's bed.

“Keep him safe.”

These were Matilda's last lucid words, to him. And they were not even for him.

He stopped eating after they buried her next to their father. His grief filled him twice over and had left no room for anything else. Gabrielle had to compel him using sweet things, fresh nectarines and picked purple figs, to fill his shirts. He was weak, then. As careless in his emotion as an infant.

“Help me up,” Quinno says. His voice breaks, a broken shard of a sound. His legs slip to the floor.

Gabrielle backs away from him. “What are you wanting to do?”

“Get up. I want to help you.”

“Help me how?”

“I don't know.”

“You can't help me like this.”

She's right. This is a thing he must do himself. He nods and kicks his legs forward, intent on doing something, anything, to show that he can stand and do much more. Be of some use to the runnings of their household and not a rank decoration to rot in one of the closets. He grasps the bedside table and raises himself. The lamp and Matilda's pot and portrait tremble. His carved dog tips.

“Stop,” Gabrielle says. She holds out her arms, near to touching him. “It's too soon.”

“I'm alright.” Quinno's knees buckle. The water in his mother's pot sways, throwing steam into the room. The vapor circles him and snaps at his lungs.

Hot and venomous, too much, in the wrong place.

He pitches forward and hacks. His temple nicks the corner of his bedside drawer.

Gabrielle hooks her forearms under Quinno's pits and carries him to settle back on the bed. She pats his upper spine. A glob of blood-speckled phlegm escapes from his mouth and paints a flower on her dress red.

Quinno's temple pulses. Something hot trickles down his cheek.

“Christ,” Gabrielle says.

He wants to apologize, but he can't. Quinno knuckles the skirt of her dress and coughs until he gags. Until he can't see his sister through his tears and his voice devolves into barks.

The pot's ladle skids and rings. Gabrielle collects another cupful of water and holds it to him.

Quinno gulps and spurts down his chin, water falling to his undershorts. “Fuck,” he squeezes out. “Hotter.” The water burns and then cools, and he shudders. The animal in him whines.

Gabrielle grabs the pot and carries it out of the room, disappearing in the cloud of its gray vapor.

Tugged by her skirt, Quinno falls though the space emptied of her body and collides with carpeted mildew. His father's wallet is sprawled out beside him, touching the tip of his nose.

It smells of soil. Tobacco juice. Decomposition and smoldering hobblebush stems. Of the dead.

When he wakes, Quinno finds himself back in his bed. His quilt is packed in a straitjacket grip. He is turned on his side and fluid dribbles from the corner of his mouth onto his spit-

flattened pillow. Despite this, his lips are dry and his tongue tastes of buckwheat. His crushed arm pulses next to his navel and he shivers violently. Sweats profusely. Cancerous, the ice under his ribcage has grown back and spread. Hot water. He needs more hot water.

Luckily, an oasis: a warm calloused hand in the dark encircles his bicep and shakes him.

“Pa?”

A sun oscillates across his vision. Blinks out. Returns. A tall man who has cropped hair as colorless as his coat stands beside his bed, wearing thick-rimmed eyeglasses. The man clicks a button on the back of his silver flashlight and slips it into one of his large front pockets. A name is embroidered on a smaller pocket on his breast: *Dr. Henry Whitlock*.

There is Gabrielle, next to the window in her red-dotted dress, crossing her arms and worrying her teeth on her fingernails. She shuffles her bare feet, her ankles sprinkled in grass shavings.

The doctor shouldn't be here. Quinno's temple itches. He pushes one arm free from his straitjacket and feels threads, five or six of them, sewn into his skin.

“Don't touch those,” the doctor says, grabbing at his wrist.

Quinno figures who he is by his hair and name. He must be the relative of a classmate: a father or uncle of Michael Whitlock: the boy who sat in the non-window seat of their shared crooked bench in Mr. Bradshaw's ninth grade math class at Newland High. Michael's hair was white, too. Atomic and unnatural: contrary to anybody's he'd ever seen. Possessed of an undefined engineering genius, the shorter boy had scribbled manically in his composition book. So much so that the elbow jerks required for his theories and mechanical illustrations of different kinds of construction pulleys and rocket engines would often sever the delicate thread of Quinno's own concentration.

“You've got new stitches next to your eye. Keep away from there for a bit.” Dr. Whitlock's hand inches up to Quinno's forehead and he keeps it there, gauging the boy's temperature.

Quinno leans into the touch. Purple remnants from the doctor's flashlight spin on the wall, distorting the faded outlines of long-sold picture frames and posters. He lets himself lull back into his pillow, falling into another slumber.

The doctor frowns. He speaks quietly to Gabrielle's ear. She nods and exits toward the kitchen. He then crouches on the bedroom floor, withdrawing from a leather duffel bag a lacquered suitcase to open on his knees. Inside, a row of syringes and needles twinkle in green felt cubbies. There are also three jars. One is a silver-capped glass vial of antibiotic fluid the color of pus. The other is filled halfway full of alcohol. The last is stuffed with cotton balls.

Quinno's breaths are an unfamiliar baritone: the hums of two, three people far older than himself.

Dr. Whitlock unscrews the caps to his alcohol and cotton ball jars and submerges one cotton ball in the alcohol. He then takes a needle and screws it into a syringe. The needle secured, he pierces the cap of the antibiotic fluid and extracts enough of it to fill the syringe's barrel to the top. Held vertically, he crushes the fluid in the plunger flange. Presses the air from the barrel.

He stands, circles Quinno's bed, and looks distastefully at the boy's quilted rump. Clucks his tongue and exchanges his cotton ball and syringe to hold in one hand. The loose skin of his thumb stretches next to the cocked metal. The doctor carefully pulls the quilt and sheet from the boy's body and clumps them atop Quinno's clammy feet.

Quinno stirs.

Dr. Whitlock curls one forefinger underneath the elastic of Quinno's damp undershorts and slides them down to the backs of the boy's knees: slowly, incrementally, moving but a millimeter for every second.

Then, in an instant, the icy touch of alcohol and the needle of the syringe pierces Quinno's pale buttock.

Quinno yelps.

The doctor reproduces the syringe. He ganders at the warped paint in the corners of the ceiling and pulls undershorts back up to the waist. Re-tucks the quilts around the young man's legs.

It takes Quinno a full minute to process what has happened: to recognize that whatever sudden danger had just accosted him and punctured his bottom has completely passed.

“I'm sorry I had to do that. Thought it might not frighten you as much if you weren't all the way here,” Dr. Whitlock says.

The doctor shouldn't be here.

Gabrielle returns. She has more ice water and a fresh cloth. Places each on the bedside table and situates herself on the bed.

Quinno wriggles from his cocoon and grabs her forearm. Whispers harshly. “What have you done?”

“I thought you were done for,” Gabrielle whispers back, shooting spit.

Dr. Whitlock uses the leftover alcohol on his cotton ball to rub the needle of his syringe. Unscrews the syringe from its barrel. He kneels and deposits his instruments back into his suitcase. Spins closed his alcohol and cotton ball jars and pushes them and the antibiotic fluid into a felt corner. The suitcase’s lock clicks.

Gabrielle dips her cloth into her bowl of ice water and dabs at Quinno's scalp.

Quinno can't stand it. He wants to rip the cloth from her and tear it into pieces, for her foolishness. They can't afford rent or a can of beans for the two of them, much less a home visit from a doctor or his remedies. Between a dirt coffin or an urn, or just wheelbarrowing him somewhere, it would have been cheaper for Gabrielle to let him wither.

He unfolds his bedding from himself. His sensitive rump pokes the mattress and he hisses, its ache growing steadily as the seconds pass. Upright and in a low timber, he speaks to the doctor's dipped head. "We can't afford you."

"You don't need to," Dr. Whitlock says. The doctor stays crouched on the carpet as though he were about to pray. Zigzagging wrinkles and acne scars mark the tops of his cheekbones. It's a patronizing form, he takes: the kind one might take to talk to a child.

Quinno stares and turns the doctor's words in his mind. What did he mean by not needing to? Why is he smiling so much? How does Gabrielle know him? Quinno paws at his stitches. His thoughts immediately go to the abominable, to the inexcusable. To the one thing the Moores have got left to lose. To an activity he has been told a few ladies do near the back exit of the Family Dollar in their short skirts and dresses in freezing weather because they've got nothing else but themselves.

"You are very lucky your sister called me," Dr. Whitlock says. He taps his suitcase. "Another couple of days and you'd have been in some big trouble. I've injected the largest muscle in your body with a suspension of Doxycycline. You have an acute respiratory infection—"

Quinno doesn't hear him. Fury now flows alongside his antibiotic, and there is nowhere for it to go. He pulls his fingers back from his temple. Blood. What had his sister agreed to? He wants to cry, to shout. His fury bubbles up in his throat. He hacks.

Gabrielle submerges and wrings out her cloth and cleans him of his blood. Dabs at his hair.

“He's not gonna stop touching them,” she says. “It's how he is.”

“I'll find something to keep him.” Dr. Whitlock zips his suitcase into his duffle bag. “My boy, he's an acquaintance of yours at the high school. Sat next to you in one of your classes. You know him? Michael?”

Quinno recalls the rapid scratching of graphite on paper in the penitentiary. Envisions another pair of thick eyeglasses and a downturned stout nose as they followed the moves of intricate mathematical equations. Michael gave himself no breaks for social interaction, save for the encouragement of Mr. Bradshaw. He had overshadowed the intellectual capabilities of his peers and thus, perhaps knowingly, isolated himself from all others. Quinno often wondered if the slant of their shared bench was the result of a manufacturing error or a direct manifestation of Michael's desire to be rid of him.

“You're gonna bring him on your little trip,” Dr. Whitlock continues. He hoists himself off the floor. Opens each of Quinno's dresser drawers. He startles at the gun, but quickly parts and reorganizes Quinno's shirts and pants. His eyes dart to the bed, to the carpet beneath Quinno's bed, and land on Gabrielle's hair. He squints.

“What trip?” Quinno spits. Gabrielle swats his arm and Quinno recoils.

“Your sister told me about what you and your friend, Kenny Leed, were planning to do after you recovered. About your adventure up Brown Mountain, to hunt the spirits. You're gonna bring Michael with you,” Dr. Whitlock says.

Quinno's heart plummets to his gut.

“May I use your restroom?” the doctor asks.

“It's next to the stove,” Gabrielle says.

The doctor vanishes, footfalls squeaking into the kitchen.

•

Kenny Leed had decided on their plans to visit Brown Mountain two weeks prior. It had happened the first day Quinno missed school—the first day of their tenth year. The afternoon was muggy: the sunlight hot enough to make a skillet out of anything resembling metal. Kenny scuffed Quinno's windowsill and tracked in the odors of his grandfather's cheap liquor and tobacco pipe on his torn flannel shirt. End-of-summer aphids swarmed his blond head in a flurry.

No matter the weather, Quinno shivered: Shivered so badly that his teeth chattered. He had taken up wood carving, to distract himself from the aching in his shoulders and legs. He used his bowie knife to whittle slices out of an oak log that he had chopped in the winter for the cabin's stockpile into something reminiscent of a dog. The only other entertainment in the cabin—a few foxed volumes of his father's literature—was packed in a box at the top of his sister's closet, collecting cobwebs.

Kenny sat at the end of the bed, hung his rucksack on a brass bedpost, and set his untuned acoustic guitar in his lap.

Though they had the years such that they could sit comfortably in silence, Quinno had felt compelled to push for some kind of small talk. It had been roughly ten hours since he heard a

noise other than his teeth and strangled breath. He wanted to hear another human voice: one full of mirth, good humor. Liveliness. Kenny's.

“I miss anything interesting at the school?” Quinno asked.

“Naw. Except that Shannon Hughes wasn't there neither and now everybody suspects you two ran away together.” Kenny smoothed down the stickers on his guitar's spruce body: stickers saying *Hi, stupid!* and *Ladies Room* pasted on either side of the soundhole. “I told them y'all went to get married.”

Quinno flicked a woodchip to the floor. “That ain't funny.”

“It is to me.” Kenny grinned.

“Her Pa would kill me just for the rumor.”

“Well, you're dying anyway. Might as well make your story interesting.” Kenny's gloved hand slid up his guitar's neck, up and down the silver frets.

Kenny's picking reminded Quinno of the way flames tear up a log. Crackling and sporadic. “What's that tune you're trying at?”

“It's the new Slade song, 'Mama We're All Crazy,' or something like that,” Kenny said. “Heard it on the radio. You've already missed out on a lot, you know.”

Quinno knew it.

Kenny repeated the same chord progression until he arrived at a melody.

Quinno started on the dog's belly, pushing the blade low into the wood and upward, to create a curve. “You're gonna make me crazy if you don't change it up.”

“What do you wanna hear, bud? And choose carefully—it could be the last thing you ever hear.”

“I'm not that bad.”

“I know.”

Mrs. Hughes' green Oldsmobile puttered up the gravel hill and to the cabin's porch at eight. Gabrielle stumbled up the front steps and swung open the storm door in her sweat-stained maroon work shirt. She had canned chicken broth and bread for their dinner, and marshmallows to toast for dessert, in a canvas bag.

Mrs. Hughes had taken pity on Quinno and thrown in the marshmallows for free. Said with her blond beehive out of the car window that the hot sugar would feel good on his throat.

His sister suggested that he get out of bed and sit in front of the fireplace to warm up. Quinno brought his knife and dog to the hearth. Cloaked in his quilt, he softened his bread in his mug of broth and chewed, heat working its way all through him.

Gabrielle squatted next to him in a fresh shirt and sipped her broth. She had left him most of the bread.

Kenny ate nothing. He cracked open the front and back doors of the cabin, to let the stars and summer freshness inside. Woodsmoke and humming frogs and other nighttime creatures filled the cabin.

With their dinner consumed, the three then did what they had always done since the Moores had sold their T.V.: prattled about the odd shoppers at the Quality Mart, complained about money, and shared the stories of their forefathers. Quinno hewed out nostrils and fur for his dog.

Kenny laid on their sunken couch and again took to plucking his guitar strings. Stuffed a cigarette in his mouth. “They could be out yonder, right now. Grampa says the spirits are rutile in dark quartz. Some people see them as circles, others as floating reeds. They're wisps of aurora

that rise and sink in the trees. The spirits go up real high and dance, and the sky becomes a glittering river of red and gold tassels.” He had rested his guitar on his stomach, cupped his grandfather's trench lighter, and swiped it into a flame. Lit up his cigarette. His tanned face shone in the firelight, carving out the mask of a spirit in his own features.

Quinno set his dog on the floor. It was not as nice as those his father had made, all glazed and smooth.

“Don't you go stressing him out,” Gabrielle said. She counted the bills of her paycheck on their coffee table. Divided the Jacksons and Washingtons into two stacks: one for rent and one for everything else. The plastic bag of cubed pink and yellow marshmallows sat dwindled at the table's middle.

“I'm not trying to,” Kenny said. “Grampa says the spirits are good people.”

Quinno scooped the wood shavings in his lap into his palm and tossed them into the fire. Yearning for sweetness, he took a marshmallow and melted it over the fire on his knife.

Kenny spoke of the Brown Mountain Lights, a paranormal phenomenon of the Blue Ridge researched by his kin going on back sixty years. First recorded by a group of fishermen from the town of Morganton, the Lights were initially described as a singular flaming ball tinier than the moon, but larger than a star. Grampa Leed had been one of these fishermen. In 1912, when he was sixteen, he was interviewed by a Mr. Mansfield, a geologist sent by the government to uncover the Light's origin. The fishermen told Mr. Mansfield that the Light would manifest in the Catawba River Valley near a trail called Rattlesnake Knob and span the slope of Brown Mountain every night, traveling a distance of about twelve miles south, to the piedmont. Some residents in the neighboring towns of Linville Falls and Jonas Ridge claimed it was light from passing vehicles or trains, but the fishermen said it was a haunt far older and more numerous.

Quinno had looked past his shoulder and out the front door of the cabin at the crescent moon obscured by the trees' leaves, its unlit portion staring upon Kenny's scalp like a great feline pupil of God: the leaves, its mane: the coiling of Kenny's cigarette smoke, its tail. Red wolves yammered in the forest and the wind coursed through the trees like the breath of one great spirit.

“They wouldn't be here if they were good,” Gabrielle said.

According to Grampa Leed, in the summer of 1916, a flood spurned by the swelling of the Catawba and Linville rivers destroyed several bridges and roads to and from Rattlesnake Knob, stopping all traffic in the area. Yet the Lights, gathered in groups of three to five, persisted. Their origin was thus thought, by more secular persons, to be St. Elmo's fire or Andes light, with the peaks of the mountain range acting as lightning rods or a geographic Jacob's Ladder, bouncing charges off of one another during turbulent weather. This explanation did not satisfy Grampa Leed or the other fishermen living in Morganton and close to Rattlesnake Knob, who further claimed to see multiple wisps on calm nights.

After Mr. Mansfield published his interviews in 1922, Grampa Leed consulted the Cherokee and Catawba peoples for the truth. He knew they had lived near Newland and Linville Falls for hundreds of years, in what the Cherokee referred to as the River of Cliffs, or the gorge sculpted out of the earth by the Linville River. Cherokee elders told him that the Lights were the spirits of their fallen soldiers from a battle fought against the Catawba: centuries before the Conquistadors had brought with them the smallpox and measles that decimated their nations. The elders believed their fighters still marched among the trees and aimed their weapons at all foreign passerby who encroached on the land. The Lights were the gleam of the soldiers' passion: the electric charge, the sting of their flint-knapped blades.

Kenny, in his fascination for any and all information concerning the history of his grandfather and the land around their trailer, wanted to feel the Lights' electricity for himself.

“That ain't true,” Kenny told Gabrielle. He took a hit off his cigarette, its red-embered end reflecting off the stickers and burnished wood of his guitar. “We ought to go find them. What do you say, Quinno? You and I go up there, to Brown, and see what it’s all about?”

His sister had said nothing, her face twisted in indecision. She stacked her bills.

Quinno imagined the native spirits, their heads shaved and black masks painted ear to ear, running alongside the red wolves in their deerskin cloth and moccasins: stopping at the gravel road to marvel the cabin's cracked columns and abraded brick like spectators peering gleefully through a portal into time: a time where karmic plague and famine has finally caught up to white men and corroded the white men's abysmal houses.

His marshmallow melted into the fire. He grabbed another. Quinno saw himself lugging he and Kenny's materials up Brown Mountain: their tarp, rope, lighters, and the spirits' eyes, weighed upon his back. Their extra trousers, boots, and socks. Knowing Kenny’s tastes, he figured they would also require an icebox to lug cans of beer from Grampa Leed’s stock. He saw himself marching this stuff up the slope in his boots and working his lungs until they popped. He determined that he would asphyxiate. Become a Brown Mountain Light and sting Kenny with his bowie knife, if he went.

Quinno didn’t offer Kenny much of an answer, then. It was more so that Kenny took advantage of his sugar-stopped mouth and decided for him, celebrating by snapping one of his guitar strings.

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Quinno clenches his eyes. Dr. Whitlock bunches up his hair inside of Gabrielle's frilly flower-patterned shower cap. Stretches it on him sideways, covering his affected temple. In his mirror, a poor excuse for a pirate glowers at Quinno, winking his one free eye.

“Now, as I'm sure you've seen, my boy doesn't have many friends. For all his gifts, he doesn't ever share them. I'd like for you to spend time with Michael. Show him yours and Kenny's way,” Dr. Whitlock says. Gabrielle stands next to the doctor and cuts a piece of tape from a roll. Presses it to the lip of the shower cap and to Quinno's cheek. To his neck.

“Our way?” Quinno asks.

“Show him what boys your age ought to be doing. How to climb trees, get in mud, and other good kinds of trouble. I'm too busy driving to houses to do it myself and his brother's just gone off to Wilmington. Michael's lived his whole life inside his head. I want you to show him what the outside world is all about.”

“He wants you to be his friend,” Gabrielle says. She flattens a bit of tape below his ear. “That's all you gotta do. It might be good for you, too, Quinno.”

Quinno wets his tongue on the roof of his mouth and shifts his jaw side to side. The tape pulls his skin taut. It's a babysitting gig. The doctor will help him live and, in return, he'll watch his kid trudge up and down Brown. Quinno and Kenny will have to carry his stuff, feed him, and give him a fresh pair of trousers when a twig snaps at the wrong time, or the leaves rustle too close to the ground. Michael was a whole foot and a half shorter than him, sitting on their bench. Yeah, a babysitting gig.

“Gabrielle here says that you and Kenny Leed have been camping in your backyard all your life. You can show Michael how,” Dr. Whitlock says. He takes the roll of tape from Gabrielle and breaks off a piece. Sets the roll on the bedside table and pats the tape to stick to the

top of Quinno's forehead. He holds his palm there and then wrings out Gabrielle's cloth, wrapping Quinno's neck like a scarf.

The doctor is right. Quinno sees it in his mind's eye vividly, that particular spring night in 1967, prior to his father leaving their home for the final time—for Vietnam. There is Jamie Moore, showing him and Kenny how to build a tent by tying frayed shoelaces to the ends of a tarp and the trunks of two pine trees. They are in the wooded portion of their backyard in Linville Falls. Kenny and him are real young, ten and eleven, and for all of the effort put into his instructions—about using weighty stones from their creek bed or nails to hold the tarp down, or ensuring that the floor is covered in pine needles and brush to keep them off the rough ground—Jamie ultimately ends up building the tent himself. Quinno and Kenny instead splinter the lower halves of sticks to emulate the guards of swords, and Quinno pokes his into Jamie's back. Jamie doesn't seem to mind. His adoration for his young son sparkles in his leathered face, rivaling the star-spotted sky.

And there is his sister, no, his mother, Matilda, stepping out from their back door holding goodies, b and c-rations, Jamie calls them, in a cardboard box. Instant coffee and chocolate are there for Quinno and Kenny to try in brown packets that they can open with their teeth. Jamie shows them how to brew the coffee by boiling it in an emptied can in a stone-ringed campfire and they sip it in other emptied cans: soldiers together, huddled under the tarp. Pine needles tickle their ankles. The old blue two-story looms, its shutters fluttering in the night air. Jamie reminds them of how he will leave tomorrow to do this in a country across the sea, leading boys twice their age, under the threat of gunfire. Quinno and Kenny giggle, as the only gunfire they've seen is on the T.V., hitting actors who are very much alive.

Quinno whispers from deep in his memory. “I can do that.”

“Good,” Dr. Whitlock says. “Consider your treatments paid for.”

“He knew Jamie,” Gabrielle adds.

“Knew him since we were young,” Dr. Whitlock says, and he beams. He grips his duffel bag.

Quinno wants to ask him a million questions: How young? Where had they met? What was his father like, when he was young? He coughs and a bolt of searing pain shoots up from his rear into his back. “You say there'll be more?” he asks, pointing to his rump.

Dr. Whitlock nods and taps the side of his thigh. “Several more. Every other day or so, to start you off. Although, it will be less traumatic,” Dr. Whitlock says, matter-of-factly, “now that you understand what is required. Consistency in the shots is key.”

The stinging in Quinno's ass disagrees, but he doesn't argue.

“I'll arrive at eight in the morning exactly, in two days' time. I got other folks to worry about.”

“We'll be here,” Gabrielle says. She stands and shakes the doctor's hand. She swallows hard. “Thank you.”

Dr. Whitlock nods to him and follows his sister to the front of the cabin. Quinno hears their footsteps and his mother's strung porcelain cross tap the glass storm door.

From his window, he sees Dr. Whitlock heave his duffel bag into the trunk of his brown Chevelle. He cups his sister's hand and tells her something, and Gabrielle agrees. The doctor then gets into his car, and its engine erupts and fades down the gravel hill.

Quinno slumps back to his fitted sheet, its chilled wet now oddly soothing on his sore leg. He shivers and drags the cloth from his neck. Dips it back into his sister's bowl and buries himself in his quilt. His shower cap crinkles on his pillow.

Next to him, Gabrielle returns to her spot on his bed and stirs her clothwater on her lap. She wrings out the cloth and holds it up to him.

Quinno shakes his head.

The ice cubes jingle between them. Gabrielle huffs and curls away from him.

“I'm sorry,” Quinno says to her reflection in his mirror. He isn't quite sure what for, but it feels right. It could be for a number of things. For having thought of her as a harlot. For having put her in the position to be one, in the first place. For the blood on her dress. For her missing work for him. For her having to dote on him like he is small and call for help when she'd had enough.

She moves closer to him. The metal bowl in her lap nearly tips. Her lower lip quivers and then, all at once, her emotions spill. Gabrielle loops herself around him. Digs her nails into the auburn fur of his quilt's handsome buck.

Quinno hugs her shoulders. Feels her trembling. He doesn't know what to say or how to say it. Doesn't know what words to conjure to fix what he's done, or to fix the great multitude of loss that has circled and picked at them anew. What Gabrielle feels is much more than what is just for him. He knows this.

She turns to him, her ear to the buck's threaded snout. Silver moons hammock on either side of her nose. “I didn't know what else to do.”

“I know.”

“It's all I could think of.”

“You did good. He seems a good man.”

“I think he is.”

“We'll make up for it, somehow.”

Another coughing fit begins in his chest. Quinno tightens his arms and presses Gabrielle's ear to his heart. He hopes that she can feel its steady rhythm. He rocks them both, gently, and whispers to her like she, too, is small.

“I'm still here. I'm still here,” he says. And his voice cracks. His eyes swell.

Water, finally, in the right place.

CHAPTER 2

JUDITH

On the other side of Brown Mountain, in a private valley two miles north of the town of Morganton, Judith Wright adjusts her nude hips above a marble slab used for modeling. She is a mannequin. Fashioned especially for her, the edge of the cubical seat—sliced from sea-foamed layers of dark and light calcite—cuts into the flesh behind her knees. One of her hands rounds her sternum and picks at gooseflesh borne of the mountain air. The other cups her jaw and pets the ends of red baby hairs below her pearled earlobe.

Her curls are longer than she remembers. Judith weaves a few strands not caught in a bobby pin through her fingers. The smooth knob of her pearl earring taps her palm, as frigid as an ice cube. She tries to ignore the pooling blood and cramping in her calves: their skin nearly as saturated as the patio tiles under her slab.

Two yards away, the tall figure of The Mason picks at a jagged pillar of chalky marble as thick as a bookshelf. His sunburnt neck, pinked like a spoiled flamingo bird, arcs over the sculpted breast of what will eventually become a carved woman. The vaulted entrance of a sizable latticed conservatory—attached to the back of a black-shuttered brick colonial—marries the pair, the artist and his art, in front of its cinquefoil canopy. Bloomed magnolia branches tower them all, surpassing the colonial's second story.

A tight knot pulses in Judith's gut. As the minutes pass, the rhythmic pecking of The Mason's steel chisel falters. Dampness collects at his flaxen brow and underarms. Exhaustion dims his spectacled eyes. The conservatory's needled spire splits the setting sun, shining through the magnolia's branches, into halves. Evening chill carries dry leaves to crowd an ironwork table and its four matching filigree chairs. In the patio's corners, rhododendron fans absent of their

pink petals jostle in squared soil patches. *Rhododendron catawbiense.* Clay and moss stir their leaves and perfume the air: the scent of an oncoming rainstorm.

“Your gardener is falling behind,” Judith says, abandoning her baby hairs to squeeze her middle, trying and failing to keep her ribs parallel to the patio floor. Her voice cellos from disuse, barely there in the rings of The Mason's chisel taps. “The rhododendrons are much too overgrown. Should have been pruned in the summer.”

The Mason leans himself on his booted heels and rolls the sleeves of his collared shirt up to his forearms. Flicks the sweat of his brow onto the tiles, and exchanges his hammer and chisel between his hands to dry his palms on his khaki trousers. “You’re right,” he says. “He must have been distracted.” He nudges his chisel, a flathead, into the crook of a hip bone and thigh. Taps lightly.

“I could do it for you, if you'd like. Tomorrow morning. It's not too late,” Judith says. And after she tore the rhododendrons to their main stems, she would also rip up the butterfly weed that had sprouted and been left to brown next to The Mason's shallow pond, past his table and chairs.

It sounds like a favor, but she needs to do something with her hands. Anything other than hold herself upright.

Two cherubs replenish the pondwater, pouring it from pitchers at the pond's center. Judith imagines a family of luminescent koi fish orbiting the lily pad stems, bubbling up pockets of air. Parting the algae like moth eaten fabric. The colonial's flipped reflection and its cycloptic upmost attic window blink in a murky ripple.

“That won't be necessary. I will remind him,” The Mason says. Up from the thigh, he carves out the beginning of a wrist, striking hard into its fragile cylinder and tossing up a powdering of dust and sparks.

Judith digs a nail into her rib. The koi fish are dancing, following the rhythm of steel and stone. She wishes that she could join them and sway away the aching in her knees. Snap back the vertebrae compressing her organs. “We're losing light much quicker, these days.”

“We will finish up soon,” The Mason says.

Judith doesn't believe him. She crosses her ankles, the bones swollen and blushed: her toes, the color of terracotta.

This day, like all other working days, has been monotonous and will likely linger into the night. She has already counted the sixteen or so wax blooms on the *Magnolia glauca* and surveyed the conservatory's forty-six green panels. Two of the uppermost panels, those curved toward the spire, are sporting unfamiliar cracks. She has considered counting the tiles of the patio, but many of them are concealed by furniture and the oakish leaves of unwished *Taraxacum officinale*. Three new sunspots have formed on The Mason's cheekbone, temple, and chin. A fourth might be on his nose, though it could be a pimple. Judith forgets how old he is.

“If I'm going to work in the rain, I'll have to renegotiate my pay,” Judith says.

The Mason ducks behind his pillar and sorts a pile of instruments. Judith has seen most of them outside of their cardboard box: flathead chisels, chisels that look like worn screwdrivers, others like miniature spears and forks. There is an assortment of hammers of both rubber and steel, and a robe to wrap her when the day is finished.

“That can be arranged,” The Mason says. His voice puppets on the far side of the carved figure, accompanied by the chiming of church bells. He remains crouched. “How much is your time worth?”

“One hundred and *sixty* dollars, at least,” Judith says.

“A month?”

Judith scoffs. “A day.”

The Mason has a thinner pointed chisel in his front pocket when he stands. He smiles. “Tonight, I was thinking of using some herbs from the conservatory to prepare a pie. I thought we might pick them together from the boxes. Would you mind helping me with the cooking?”

“A meat pie?”

“Yes. Shepherd's pie. You've had it before, yes?”

Judith straightens her spine. She can't place the last time she has eaten shepherd's pie, though she knows it had been one of her favorite meals as a child. Prepared by her mother, Junie, for each of her birthdays.

Judith sees dual-colored candles shoved into potato crust. Smells the scents of melting wax and spiced beef rising from one of Junie's finer engraved baking dishes.

“Many times,” she says.

“Excellent. Then you can show me how it's prepared.”

At the conclusion of her modeling, Judith would usually retire to her suite and plush bed and wrap herself in layers of blankets and quilts to thaw her limbs. She would then have a meal of bread, fresh vegetables, and sweet canned fruits brought to her or to the dining room by The Mason himself, depending on her willingness to dress. Most often, she chose her bed and its adjoined headboard cabinet of manuals on local botany and wildcrafting to have her meals.

Though tonight, with The Mason's invitation to assist him in an herbal venture, she would certainly join him.

"I can try," Judith says. Already, she feels the excitement of the task. The prickle of the hairy plant stems in the conservatory. The knife blade atop their colorful leaves and other vegetables, and their sweet mixture on a cutting board and smothered in olive oil in a pan.

The Mason approaches and peels Judith's wrist from her waist to hold in his hands. His nails are unkempt: skin, calloused. He rubs his cracked thumb pads embedded with dust between her wrist's two largest bones. Traces the vein meandering from Judith's forearm to her knuckles.

Judith's stomach rolls, loudly, and she feels herself flush.

"Give me one more hour," The Mason says.

It sounds like a vow.

He returns to his stone. The dip of Judith's wrist appears in the stark white of the statue's wrapped arm. She reforms herself to match the modeled image, becoming still as the stone itself.

It had been a surprising gift of her paralysis: her renewed interest in botany and wildcrafting, inherited from her mother. A gift of her suite's cabinet of curiosities that has done well to satiate her in the stretches of time on the marble. For six days of the week, while The Mason commits himself to his carving, Judith poses on her slab and watches the first and final sun rays leap from the mountains to the piedmont. Catalogs the flora and fauna that the sunlight touches, practicing the scientific denominations and medicinal uses of every flower and herb that she has memorized from her copy of the *Universal Botanical Guide and Reference,* and other manuals. Determines how she might organize them in her textbook-turned-herbarium, or instruct the gardener on how to better cultivate each.

If she has counted correctly, tomorrow it will be Saturday: the most exciting day of her week in which she has developed a routine of waking even earlier in the morning to roam The Mason's gardens with her *Guide* and try at wildcrafting herself, and slip flowers and herbs to dry in her herbarium's pages of mathematics. It is on these trips into the conservatory and the twilighted woods that Donnie, the gardener, joins and assists her in The Mason's absence—albeit silently.

The Mason informed Judith at the start of her employment, several weeks ago now during one of their first shared dinners, that Donnie had lost his tongue in a childhood accident—something to do with jasmine and rusted trellis wire—and that he would never be able to return a fruitful conversation.

However, when together, Judith has no problem telling Donnie—filling in all elements of the conversation for the nervous man—about the healing benefits of the rosemary and fennel that she instructs him to harvest into his bucket, and later garble and simmer in copper pots of hot oil and liquor in The Mason's kitchen. Judith mixes *Salvia rosmarinus* salves for the lines etched into her hamstrings and around her navel. Blends lemon and *Zingiber offficinale* tinctures to soothe her monthlies. And every so often, she has Donnie crush a lavender tea to help quell his jitters.

“Lift your head,” The Mason says.

Judith raises her chin. She wonders where Donnie might be, at this very moment: whether he is the room adjoined to the attic window, watching her with his copy of The Mason's face, though with deep-set, onyx eyes: or if he is somewhere on the front side of the colonial, hacking away at the wisteria vines spiraling its gables and eaves: another task she might do herself if he is, again, *distracted*.

In the metronomic lull of The Mason's pattering chisel, to fill the remaining hour of her duty, Judith pictures herself in a pleasant domesticity. She, as not a woman stuck in the hypochondriac scheme of The Mason, but a wife—and he, a husband. The estate and its plentiful gardens as hers. Maybe Other Judith, a better Judith, had brought her beloved lemonade or tea to share while he worked: in crystal glasses stood on a golden tray with delicately frosted fruitcakes and triangle-sliced turkey sandwiches.

In seeing his most cherished come out of the conservatory in a silk shift, Other Mason *insists* on capturing the beauty of her likeness in his chosen medium. And Other Judith, in her love and admiration for her husband and his craft, obliges him. She places the lemonade or tea on the filigree table and flutters to her striped seat. Cradles her cheek. Once there, she sits proudly and endures him. Lets her shift be lifted to fly and land somewhere on the grass. Donnie, at the patio's border and diligently trimming the rhododendrons, catches the dress and hides it into the side pocket of his fresh overalls.

The sour iodine and smoky mixture of the turkey sandwiches is so real that Judith salivates. Her stomach rolls.

A flash of light and crack of thunder, akin to an explosion, shatters her illusion and Judith's exposed body rattles. The loose glass panels of the conservatory's doors shake.

Judith tastes metal. Smells burning. A full bladder hangs heavily in her pelvis.

The Mason halts and steps from his carving to surveil the darkening sky in the west, pillared by the shaved peak of Table Rock. A murder of crows caws, traveling in a figure of infinity from the tree line marking the boundary of the mountains to the colonial's roof, toward the south.

The firmament reflects off of The Mason's circular lenses. Black dots of crows speed by and fill their pools. A growing stain of nighttime indigo and soaked storm clouds spills at the golden frames' edges.

The cobalt blue of The Mason's iris replaces the clouds. His expression is neither shocked nor angry. “I suppose now is as good a time as any,” he says. He slips his tools into the front pockets of his trousers, coated in the pale dust borne of his hammer.

Metal pattering is exchanged for windswept foliage. The magnolia’s upmost branches pendulate. The Mason is eclipsed by his pillar of stone and he reappears outside of the conservatory’s doors at a work bench. It is constructed out of rusted nails and raw wood, and is pushed against the outer glass.

Judith lets her spine recurl. The wind, increasing in strength by the minute, tugs at the bobby pins in her hair. She drags them from her scalp, holding sections of her red hair down to reduce their sting. She counts eight pins and prods for the ninth at the base of her skull. Unwinds the braid circling the bun on the back of her neck. Flowing freely, her hair whips every which way.

The Mason's blueprints and sketches drawn in their previous sessions hang by adhesive strips on the outside of the conservatory. The remaining light of the day bleeds into the room beyond, the sun's rays now fractured further by the thick stalks and petals of the inner room's taller plants. Lower herbs hunch like ground-dwelling animals: leaves, the snouts of captured rabbits and mice.

Illuminated by lanterns on either side of the conservatory's entrance, Judith examines the intricate design at the core of The Mason's drawings. It is of her. A copy of herself sits in the four frayed corners of a tarnished canvas, her back arched and jaw scooped in her hand. Uniform

numbers and fine lines of faded ink contour bone and skin. Restless lantern flames plunge an empty drawn face into occasional shadow.

Judith rotates the bobby pins in her palm. Inside the pillar of stone, she sees herself: her turgid spine and shoulders blades, the strait of her shin, and some other form of her head remaining suffocated inside a topmost glob of white. The carving is far from complete, but it is her, distinctly.

The Mason shuffles his sketches and papers, stacking and unstacking measurements, illustrations, and picture clippings of other works of marble glued to cut pieces of canvas—glossy and collected from textbooks. Brass hinges of slammed drawers groan as he strips the outer conservatory wall of his materials and protects them from the oncoming wet. Judith's drawing is scrolled and wrapped by a leather cord.

One work catches The Mason's attention and occupies him. It is a printed carving of a hand, outstretching for something that has been cut off—unable to fit onto its piece of canvas. All delicately sculpted knuckles and veins.

Judith clenches her knees together. She tries to conjure dry things. The mountains as yellow desert dunes and molting lizards and scorpions to rest in their caves. The heat of the sun in the summer, or the peeling patch of skin on her waist. Time itself crawls.

But the rain begins, twinkling on the filigree table and chairs and pondwater like jewels.

The Mason shoves the image of the hand into a back pocket. Pulls a sheet of tarred canvas from below the bench to lay at the base of the carved woman. His hands rush along the broken and unbroken sections of the carving's rock, cataloging the progress of the day: the improvements for next week.

The Mason stops at the suffocated head and measures the phantom cavity with the length of his forearm. Marks a reference point on its proposed scalp with his thumb. Pushes his frames up to his hair. He bends down to his box of tools and drapes Judith's robe on his arm.

He then comes to nudge his elbow below Judith's chin: to prod his thumb into the crown of her head.

The copper-coin mixture of the rain and The Mason's sweat assaults Judith's nose. His stubbly forearm brushes her temple. She is caged in his arms.

His breath is hot on her face. “Your hair is longer,” he says, “since we started.”

Judith wants to plug her nostrils. It is the proximity: the touch to her face: the intense uninhibited blue of his eyes. It is the sinking of her bladder and many nameable and unnameable things. The Mason's touch is light, but she feels as though she is now twice her weight: that the marble beneath her is sucking her limbs down toward the earth in a strange magnetism. The sky shrinks to a pinpoint. Vertigo.

Judith hooks a piece of the dry skin from her waist under a nail. Peels until it stings. Distraction and relief.

She points the knobbed ends of her bobby pins into The Mason's shirt.

The Mason breaks the cage of his arms and collects them: counts them, mouthing silently to nine. He unlatches the pearl earrings from her lobes and drops each of the items into a shirt pocket. Drapes his robe around Judith's shoulders.

“Are you fine to walk?”

Judith knots the robe closed. It's damp and clings to her skin. “Probably. I will see you tonight?”

The Mason rubs the lenses of his glasses on the hem of his shirt and replaces them on his thin nose. “Yes, I will come get you in a few minutes.” He returns to the carved woman and the stench of copper dissipates. He heaves his box of chisels and hammers to sit beneath his workbench.

Judith sheds herself from the marble slab.

Her skull immediately fills with lead. The world pulses, as though she is full of opium. Without the marble, she is a newborn, jelly-limbed until her body's fluids circulate back into homeostasis. A thousand bugs tingle up her calves. She cannot feel the tiles under her feet. She clutches the corner of the slab.

In the valley behind his estate, several yards past the shallow pond, The Mason's other projects shoot up from the earth as starlight flecks on top of the flowing carmine and vermillion of the Appalachian firs, maples, and oak trees. Arranged in sections of close-shaven grass and lined by jasper pavers are eight women, all carved into brilliant stone. Their vibrant marble bases are decorated in breccia veins of matching dark and light calcite. A few of the women lay on their sides, hands rested on their thighs. Others stand tall with their mica-freckled legs overlapped in mock displays of virtue, arms swept upward or entangled in their hair.

The thought arrives casually, too casually, as if it doesn't carry the weight that an assessment of her future ought to. As the ninth proposed statue in his collection, Judith wonders where The Mason will place her own carving when he decides there are no more improvements to make: no more divots to be dug into the carving's wrists, or in its ensuing replications of her hair and face. And Judith wonders where she, herself, will go when her reference is no longer necessary.

Her temples ache. Not enough blood has reached her brain. The frigid cold creeps up from the patio floor into her legs.

Judith imagines the real women, the fleshy women that elicited the projects' images, bent and boxed in their calcite cubes like the climbers she read about in one of the science magazines in her headboard cabinet: past the Atlantic and frozen in packed snow near the top of a mountain far bigger than any fencing The Mason's estate: those climbers trapped forever on a peak where no living thing could possibly thrive, the oxygen too thin.

An eternity in any form must be Hell, Judith thinks. Above the marble, or inside of it.

The vertebra holding up her skull shifts and a spiderbolt of pain shoots from her shoulder blades down into her hips. The dam of blood breaks: heat seeps from her spine into her head, and the world settles. Judith touches her chin to either side of her clavicle. As far as she can see, no section of land has been set aside for her—no plot dug to set her twin to rest. The grass in front of the tree line is still wild and uncut, dancing in the stormwind.

Judith rotates an ankle, matching the secondhand of a clock, and the bones crack with thunder less than a mile away. The wind licks her heel and raindrops dot her pale calf. One tentative foot prods forward onto tile turned to a sheet of ice. And then another.

Through the conservatory's doors, the ocean of wind-swept trees is silenced and enclosed musk nourishes her like nectar: the air sweetened with fertilizer and artificial serenity. The heated flagstone is pleasant on Judith's soles. Red-spattered bellies of Turk's cap lilies and their maroon stamen swim like jellyfish in wide painted boxes, pushed in the conservatory's corners. Crying infant faces of *Phalaenopsis amabilis* bend and tickle Judith's hips in more stout boxes

nearer to the floor. Flatter boxes labeled with wooden placards for basil, parsley, rosemary, thyme, and other herbs line the walkway. More fat raindrops pop on the olive roof.

The Mason tosses his tarred canvas into the air and veils the carved woman. Her ghostly visage projects upon the capsule jungle's outer doors.

Judith passes the shadow of The Mason's workbench toward another set of wooden doors carved into two halves of a lion's face. Their cherrywood is covered partially by an elephant ear plant. The plant's tallest leaves, eight feet high, brush the conservatory's roof. Judith finds more cracks in the upper panels.

Already, she hears the scratching. The huffing. Sees the lion doors shuddering in their frame.

Judith braces herself. Turns one half of the lion's nose.

A rush of cooler air shocks her skin. Plantmatter and fertilizer are overwhelmed by paraffin and turpentine polish for a hallway of more cherrywood doors. Her legs are bathed in the colorful light of dust-covered bulbs in Tiffany cups.

The Mason's giant mastiff, slathered in his own mouthmatter on his mud-dipped face, clobbers at her, and redirects his clawing from the doors to the fabric on her legs.

It takes nearly every ounce of her remaining strength for Judith to push him away.

Abaddon follows her and billows his moist barks into the otherwise silent house, nose occasionally bumping her bottom.

Judith hobbles to a carpeted stairwell in the main foyer and grasps an ornate ball-capped newel stood below a chandelier missing several of its jewels. The chandelier swings and flickers, coruscating upon the tall stucco walls and ceiling. She thrusts one half-dead leg up the steps and lifts the other with chilled fingers. Like bread dough, she nearly slips through herself.

She repeats this process of thrusting, shifting, and lifting her limbs until she is greeted by oil portraits of The Mason's family on a balcony. They are of his parents, Judith assumes, captured in their formalwear, and framed by wainscotting the color of basil. Hung on the leftmost portion of the wall, the father has The Mason's skinny nose and cleft chin, and wears a green Army uniform. The gold leaf of a medallion of Liberty raising the halved sword of Mars glows among the darker oils like the eyeshine of an animal.

On the opposite end of the wall, The Mason's mother smiles in a gray wing-collared dress and pearls. Her dimples match those of her son.

It is strange to Judith that there are no other portraits: not even of The Mason himself, to fill the rest of the wainscoting.

One summer afternoon, while they consumed a lunch of sliced fruit and sweet tea, The Mason had told Judith about how Donnie's mother had worked for his family. She had been a live-in maid, housed in a cottage Judith saw one Saturday morning while Donnie led her to the western border of the estate, where they found a capped well ringed by dandelions. The cottage, painted yellow, reminded Judith of the one she shared with her mother, both having splintered siding and barren plant box windowsills.

The Mason told Judith about how several years ago, when he and Donnie were not yet wise enough to understand the hierarchy of their household, they had been young boys who ventured out into the thick cover of the trees to be whomever they wanted. Most often, they reenacted the war stories of The Mason's father.

In one story, The Mason was a weary Aryan soldier who had lost his way in the Ardennes, clothed in grey gardening overalls. Donnie was a burly American, hiding out in his mother's cottage and waiting for the chance to ambush, black paint smeared under his eyes.

Donnie had rushed at The Mason with a piece of iron fencing, bent to match the grip of a pistol. In another story, they were brothers fighting a German offensive together, which were a group of wild bursting muscadine vines, torn through by their silver butter knives. They had slashed enough grapes to stomp out a barrel of wine.

“Though it's important to remember who you are,” The Mason had said. He peeled appleskin on a knife blade and bit the pulp. “For children to understand their true place.” She'd not known what he meant.

Was Donnie not family?

Past the portraits and down another procession of doors, Judith shuffles to one, the only one, with a lock on the outside of unblemished brass. The mastiff noses her ass through the doorway. She pushes him away and forces his snout back out into the hallway.

Her suite is the appropriate size for a child. She can cross the pathway between her bed and dresser to her bathroom in ten limps. The bathroom itself is about the same size as the bedroom and covered, floor to halfway up the wall, in orange ceramic tiles the size of index cards. A frosted window captures the gleam of a lightning strike. Thunder grumbles deep enough to make the toilet's tankard chain rattle in the corner.

Judith removes her robe and resigns herself to the toilet seat. She then fills the basin of her solitary sink and scrapes soap from an amber dish underneath each of her nails. Carefully, as though she were a surgeon preparing to open a patient's heart, she works her way up to her knuckles and forearms. From there, the soap reaches further, up to her elbows. All the way to her shoulders, she is covered in suds.

It is the pale stone dust of The Mason's hammer. So fine-grained that it coagulates into a translucent batter from the touch of rain. Judith has to scrub hard, thorough to the point of

reddening the skin, to make any difference in its cement fusion. And the phlegm of that God awful dog. She lathers more soap and scours her face, neck, and breast. When her torso is as shiny as fresh paint, she rinses and dabs herself dry on her robe.

In the oval mirror, Judith traces the lines on her knees and around her navel. They are raised sewn eels, or the wavelets of a stone skipped on a pond's surface.

Callouses ought to have grown by now on her knees, Judith thinks, to accommodate the marble's rough edge. She pops the lid of a jar on her vanity and collects a dollop of rosemary salve onto her wrist. Covers each knee scar thoroughly and spoons an extra heap on her navel. She rubs the skin of her pelvis dotingly, as though extra life is within her.

She is getting to that age, Judith reminds herself, where she should probably consider more seriously the elements of her future. Turn turkey sandwich platters and silk shifts into a reality for herself. Fill wainscoting with portraits of her own family.

Her face scrunches and she rubs the creases on her tanned forehead and around her eyelids.

Judith guesses, were she to get close enough to her reflection, she might find the zipper at her scalp's middle that would unfurl and reveal to her the girl she truly is. She parts her hair, frizzed by the rain, and finds a singular gray hair. Instinctively, she nips it from her scalp and whisks it to her toilet bowl. From another stoppered jar, she drops a few beads of lavender scented oil onto her hair and brushes it through her curls. Meticulously, groups of strands are wound into tight coils and let loose to fall on her shoulders.

One gray hair. Eight new freckles on her face. Tens of freckles on her arms. When had she gained so much weight on her hips? The sun has turned her to a prune. A spinster.

An idea, a puzzle piece, ricochets from the back of her skull. Snaps itself into place at the forefront of her thoughts. A key slides into a lock.

It would be very convenient, were The Mason's estate her own. If the conservatory decorated with her favorite *Lilium lancifolium* and the land that has become all so ingrained into her own person, were hers. Judith fluffs her hair. But of course, to have the estate would also require that she have The Mason and his mastiff. She scrunches her nose.

All boys are beasts.

Judith pretends that she is being brushed by her mother's wooden comb. That she is sitting on Junie's daisy-patterned comforter, allowing her hair to be oiled and braided in their cottage in Chapel Hill. It is a late school night, and her mother still carries the odor of her maternity wards' antiseptic on her crumpled nurse's uniform. Junie's hair is knotted in a bun inside her cap, and her lipstick is cracked. Her voice reverberates. The key turns.

Learn the leash that holds them and pull tight.

Judith rubs the excess oil on the pulse points of her neck and limps to her dresser. Atop the wood, there is a lace-trimmed hat box overflowing with twenty-dollar notes, a bundle of dried lavender, and her herbarium: *Mathematics, Concepts, Applications*. A ginger tincture bottled in a mason jar reflects the light from her room's sconces, reminiscent of a formaldehyde specimen. She takes a linen shift from a dresser drawer and lets it unfurl. Slides it up her knees. Unknots a blue ribbon to cinch her waist.

A glimmer of gold catches her eye. Above another shift, there is a pendant laid on the drab cloth like a hotel chocolate, as yellow as a daisy's pistil. *Leucanthemum vulgare*.

Something within her stirs. She dons a pair of underwear and traces the unfamiliar pendant in her hands. It is a heart locket, and inside, there is the gray portrait of an infant, no more than six months old.

Her mind conjures the pink makeup vanity in her mother's bedroom in their cottage, and the portrait Junie keeps of a baby Judith, framed by pewter angel wings next to her powder foundation compact and bullet lipstick.

Were she to look again at the carved women in The Mason's valley, would she not find another among them? A cherub, posed on top of its own slab?

Judith clicks the locket shut and dangles it from its chain in the air. It spins, and on its polished back, she reads an etched inscription.

“Philo,” she whispers. A cog in her mind shifts against its rust and spins slightly, the idea of a thing spilling towards the tip of her tongue. “Philo” she says, again. The idea doesn’t quite make it, sinking back into her gut.

Booted footfalls sound from outside her bedroom, one step dragged and weightier than the other. The floorboards creak.

Judith swiftly pushes the dresser drawer shut. Pinches open the locket necklace's clasp and loops its chain around her neck. Cracks open her bedroom door.

“Donnie?”

The locket slips from her grip and clatters to the floor. Judith catches the pant leg and booted foot of Donnie entering into the hallway’s final door.

The man, a bit shorter than The Mason, leans backward, out of the doorframe. Donnie's face beneath his newsboy cap is grave: skeletal. His overalls are soaked: as blackened as the world beyond the hallway's curtained window.

“Donnie, are you alright?” Judith asks, bending to retrieve the locket. She hooks it around her neck.

Donnie's lips mumble as though he were miraculously about to speak. His gaze jumps from her face to the locket, and lands at the end of the hallway. His eyes harden.

On the balcony before the stairs, The Mason stands, lit by an oil lantern on his arm not belonging to this century. The mastiff, as silent as his master, is reined by his scruff.

Neither man moves. For a long and unpleasant couple of seconds, Judith wonders if the men will again draw their Army weapons, though this time real, and interlace the outside world's thunderclaps with bulletfire.

Instead, Donnie recedes into the shadow of his door's adjoined room.

Judith hears a particularly loud thump. And when she listens closely enough, as his door is thrust along its hinges, she thinks, she swears, she hears the light squeal of a child.

The Mason passes her and stands in front of Donnie's door. He tugs the doorknob.

Abaddon paws at the door's wood and lulls his head to the side. Whimpers. The room is locked.

“Donnie is not fond of thunderstorms,” The Mason says. He turns and steps back towards Judith, guiding the mastiff to sit next to the wall. “They've always driven him into an odd panic.”

Judith counts the wet pawprints left by Abaddon between her door and the balcony. The odor of the dog's drenched fur reminds her of sewage. “Shouldn't we accompany him, then?” she asks.

“No, no. I'm sure he's actually quite embarrassed.”

The rain thrums.

“Did you hear that sound?” Judith asks.

“What sound?”

“The squeal in his room: did you hear it?”

“This is a very old house. The floorboards move often, especially during squalls.” The Mason shuffles his polished dress shoes on the hardwood.

The sound does not match.

He offers Judith his arm, now covered in the sleeve of a fresh collared shirt, perfumed in leathery cologne. “Shall we go?”

Judith doesn't take it. She holds up the locket, opening it to reveal the picture of the infant. “Is there a child, here?”

Recognition washes over The Mason's features. His lantern flickers in his lenses. He then laughs. “I haven't seen that in a very long time. Not since my grandmother wore it. Where did you find it?”

“In my room. Who is this inside?”

“I'm not certain. It could be of my mother. It is an antique. Victorian.”

In the dim light of the sconces, The Mason's eyes seem the color of pitch: as infinite as Donnie's: the infant's. Judith reaches for the clasp to undo the locket's chain. It was foolish of her to ask any questions at all. What is she thinking, wearing her employer's heirlooms, and asking him about such personal things?

The Mason raises his hand, as though to stop her. “Are you fond of it?”

“The necklace?”

“Yes. You can keep it, if you like. It suits you.”

Pull tight.

“Surely I can't take an heirloom from you,” Judith admonishes.

“I am a man. I don't have much use for lockets. If I take it back, it will sit in my room and tarnish.” He offers her his arm again. Implores her to carry his lantern.

Judith lets the locket settle on her shift. Lightning paints red the cherrywood of Donnie's door. The sky cracks open and the walls of the colonial jolt with the wind.

The mastiff whimpers, low and melancholy.

“I suppose a desire for solitude runs in the family, no?” Judith loops her arm around The Mason's and points the lantern before them.

His grip tightens and loosens, and The Mason laughs, hollowly. “I could see that being true, were that actually the case.”

The Mason leads them, Judith on one arm and his beast on the other, down the hallway to descend the stairs. At the bottom step, they are dipped into the light of the lantern's lonely flame. The rainbows of the sconces return.

“We may lose power. Are there enough blankets in your suite? The temperature is expected to dip low, tonight,” The Mason asks. He leads Abaddon to the colonial's main entrance. Unlocks the brass padlock stitching the front doors and thrusts the dog out into the rain.

Judith almost feels bad for it. “I have plenty,” she murmurs. “Is it safe to go into the conservatory?”

“It ought to be. I’ve seen its walls endure much worse weather than this. I’ve placed more lanterns along the walkway in case we lose power.”

“How will we cook our food if the stove cannot function?”

“I have a wood-burning stove, inherited from my mother’s side.”

Judith laughs at this. “Are we to pretend to be settlers, tonight? To eat within nature?”

“We could do that, if you would prefer it.”

They pass through the threshold of the lion doors and onward into the conservatory. Its glass panels are indicolite, caped in nightlight. Thrills of rain pelt the roof and sides, giving the appearance that they are stepping forth into a ship-captain's wheelhouse. As promised, lanterns line its stone walkway, brightening the placards for the herbs.

The Mason removes and unfolds a paper from a back pocket.

Judith reads an ingredient list. The handwriting is curled, feminine, and again, something in her stirs.

"Shepherd's pie calls for parsley, thyme, salt, and black pepper, though I feel you might be fond of using some of that basil, too," The Mason says.

Judith hums and remembers her hunger. Her stomach rolls. "That would be lovely."

They crouch in front of the herbs and, having forgotten a bowl, The Mason picks and places bunches of their prickly stems in his shirt.

Judith halves the stems with her nails. Piles a few leaves of *Ocimum basilicum* on her knee and sneaks one onto her tongue. It is sour. She yearns for something sweet. "Would rosemary not work as well?"

"There is rosemary, that's for remembrance," The Mason says. "I'm not too keen on it."

"That is a shame. Their flowers are beautiful. Such a nice shade of purple," Judith says.

When enough herbs have been collected to dye the entire lower half of The Mason's shirt green, they make their way to the kitchen. The pair take an immediate right from the lion doors and walk past a table and chairs set for eight. There are silver-trimmed plates on top of lace doilies, linen napkins stuffed into glass goblets, and two of every fork and spoon. A powdering of dust covers everything.

In the middle of the kitchen, a smaller table marked by scratches supports sacks of potatoes, carrots, onions, and garlic, and boxes of tomato paste and broth. There are also a mesh bag of peas and what Judith assumes is meat wrapped in paper.

“What meat do you usually put in your shepherd’s pie? My mother used beef,” Judith says. Junie had taught her to make use of everything. Beef trimmings could be made into hundreds of things: shepherd's pie, tallow for salves and soaps, and compost.

Judith circles the table and its two wicker chairs and digs into a lower cabinet for a pan. She finds a cast iron pan and places it on top of the electric enamel stove. Turns a knob to give it heat.

“Lamb. Mincemeat, usually. Though I’ve picked something nicer for us,” The Mason says.

“Are we celebrating something?” Judith asks.

“It is your birthday today, is it not?”

His back to Judith, The Mason takes out a cutting board from another lower cabinet and rests it on the tiled countertop next to the sink. He spills his shirt of herbs onto its oiled surface. From the pocket of his trousers where he usually keeps his chiseling tools, he removes a knife: sponges it under the faucet and begins cutting the herbs.

Did she tell him the date of her birthday? Judith supposes she must have had to, when he had hired her. It is October 13th. This means—Judith counts her fingertips—that she has been modeling for four months. Sixteen Saturdays.

“Perhaps you could peel those potatoes?” The Mason rifles the cabinets for a peeler and gives it to Judith, hilt first. He places a large pot next to the sink and turns the oven temperature to three-hundred and fifty degrees.

The peeler might as well be a foreign contraption. Judith momentarily forgets which of its ends are for holding, for peeling. Sixteen Saturdays. Where has her mind been?

She falls into one of the wicker chairs and peels several potatoes, none larger than a golf ball.

Her stomach shrinks to their same size.

The Mason fills the large pot in the sink and heats it on the stove, to boiling. After a short while, he has diced the carrots, onion, and garlic to be of similar size to the peas. He spatulas them into the cast iron with the herbs and spices. Tosses the vegetables around the pan and cooks them to translucence. He unwraps the meat.

Judith stands and drops her peeled potatoes into the boiling water. “What have you got there?”

“The best part,” The Mason says, peering down into the paper. He peels the adhesive away and reveals the head of a lamb, absent of its skin. Its nose spires up from the table, as though the rest of its body lay swinging from a hole through the wood. He reaches for his knife and collects slices from its face, ears, and pate onto the cutting board. The marbles of the lamb's eyes are left untouched.

Judith stares into the humid vapor of her potato water and swallows. Kisses her heart locket.

Her face must betray her. The Mason laughs. “Have you not eaten lamb, before?”

“Of course I have.”

“Then you must know this is normal.”

“Yes. Though, that doesn’t mean I enjoy watching it prepared.”

“Good flavor comes with a hefty cost.” The Mason removes the tongue. He reapplies the adhesive and paper to cover the skull. He dices the lamb shavings and throws them in with the vegetables. After a few minutes, he pours scores of tomato paste and boxed broth into the cast iron, and the fusion of the meat and vegetables becomes homogenous.

“The potatoes are getting there,” Judith says.

“I’ll be back in a moment.” The Mason washes his knife, conceals it in his pocket, and disappears out of the kitchen door, lamb skull in his fist.

Judith hears the conservatory doors open and shut. She cuts the heat from her pot. Drains the water in the sink and replaces the pot onto the stove.

In one of the upper cabinets, a bottle of wine calls to her with the promise to stretch her belly. Sixteen Saturdays. What does it matter that her mind slips a bit more?

The Mason returns and adds butter, the last dollop of milk from a jar, and a teaspoon of salt, to the potatoes.

He smells of the dog, and Judith's mind paints the lamb skull, latched inside of Abaddon's wide jaw.

“Would you kindly?” The Mason asks. He hands Judith a masher. Holds the pot over the stove firmly.

Judith stamps the potatoes into a whipped emulsion.

“Excellent,” The Mason says. He cuts the heat from the meat and vegetables, the broth having simmered away.

Judith spreads white mountains of flavor onto the hash into a layer an inch thick.

The Mason places the concoction into the oven. “Now we wait.”

Judith swirls a bead of wine at the bottom of her glass.

“Would you still like to eat in the conservatory?” The Mason asks. He lifts the shepherd’s pie from the oven, butter and juice sizzling out from breaks in the crust.

Judith hoists herself from her wicker chair. There is Abaddon, gnawing at her thoughts. Licking the lamb skull to its white. “The dining room should be fine.”

“Lovely.”

Two of the dining table’s plates are brushed of their dust. Soon, Judith is spooning a small bit of potato into her mouth and pushing aside the vegetables and lamb.

“Extraordinary,” she says.

The Mason wipes his lips on a napkin. “I’m glad you’re pleased.”

Lanterns on the table’s surface reflect wisps of orange and yellow into his glasses, and onto the windows to her left. The flames ricochet, leaping in their images onto every shiny thing, from the table’s veneer, to the spoons in their mouths. The Mason looks as though he has been dipped into the Inferno itself, mouth full of lamb.

Pelting rain and wind. Judith finishes another glass of wine. Her dinner cools.

At the other end of the dining room, a series of paintings hang, catching the lanterns' light. Unlike the portraits on the second-floor balcony, these consist of landscapes in watercolor.

Her favorite is the waterfall in the leftmost corner. The painter had been highly attentive and intricate, Judith thinks, layering the watercolor until it matched the richness of oil. What would take an oil painter to do in five layers, this artist achieved in ten, or fifteen. Although, if the painter had intended to depict Linville Falls, its cliff faces the wrong direction.

Judith pushes her discarded lamb and vegetables around her plate. Pats her lips on her napkin.

At the other end of the wall, perpendicular to the windows, an image of a flatter mountain adorned in colors of autumn hangs. She can’t discern its name. Though beneath its golden frame, there is something new. Something hunched next to a lower windowpane.

Judith sobers.

A child's highchair, folded to be but a sliver, perches against the windowglass.

CHAPTER 3

QUINNO

The bathwater is pungent. Cleansing on Quinno's skin after having been scented with Matilda's rose oil. It was Gabrielle's idea: for unraveling the mats in his hair, and curing him of the stench amassed from a month of bedrest. Submerged in the pinkish fluid up to his nose, his legs are floating preachers, his knees akin to naked oceanside cliffs. Drips from the rusted faucet cast tiny waves. His hue is indistinguishable from the porcelain-lined tub: its rim thicker than his calves.

When their mother passed, neither he nor Gabrielle had been able to part with the oil. To afford her coffin, most of everything in the cabin—the posters on their bedroom walls, their childhood knickknacks and toys, the spare chairs, and bedding—could be taken to the Calhouns. But not the oil. It was too much of Matilda to lose in one go. Too many memories stoppered into a three-inch bottle.

Without their bodies to hold them, spirits spill everywhere. Into every little thing.

“To a Wild Rose,” the oil's label reads. The bottle is a buoy in Quinno's pruned hands: a miniature decanter, its liquid red in the rounded bottom of its glass. He pinches the bottleneck. Removes the metal stopper and touches the glass brim to his nose, inhaling a field's worth of petals.

His mind dives to a memory of his mother alive, hanging laundry to dry on two clothing lines in their backyard, in Linville Falls. It is 1967, and the creek adjacent to the blue two-story purls faintly. The sheets pinned to the clothing lines flap in the noonday wind, diffusing their florals. His ten-year-old self reclines in the same woven basket that holds the Moores' dirty laundry. He counts the basket's staves. Toes the cross lashing on its outer rim.

There is nothing about the day that is unusual. His father will leave their home for the Hậu Nghĩa Province that afternoon: disappear in the same way that he has done every other year or so of Quinno's life.

Matilda's braid trails to the stained apron tied at her hips. She carries on with her chores, as if truly nothing is amiss. She teaspoons her rose oil into a barrel of water frothed by soap on the grass and hand-mixes the solution. Scrubs Quinno's shirts on a zinc washboard. “I ought to throw you in here,” she says, stopping to spritz the bottoms of his feet. “With you laying in them soiled garments, and all.”

Younger Quinno squirms and hides in the heap of shirts and trousers. There are his father's cargo pants, doused in the pine and woodsmoke from their camp the night before. Instant coffee and chocolate still swish inside of his belly. “I'm clean, mama.”

“You certainly are not. You look like you have been living in the woods,” she says.

Younger Quinno grins.

“That sunlight in your eyes?” Matilda asks.

“Yeah.”

She brings his basket closer to her barrel. He is shielded from the light by a sheet. His mother's elongated shadow engulfs the fabric. The loose hairs in her braids flit about the cotton. There is red around her undereyes.

He listens to the creek burble: to his mother's doleful mumble-singing.

The oil bottle slips and bobs in the bathwater. Quinno gasps and catches its neck, replacing its metal stopper. He sets it on a flat plank on the floor. The fluorescent bar on the ceiling buzzes. Faint voices emanate on the other side of the bathroom door.

He rolls onto his back. Plunges his face beneath the tub's rim. Heat envelopes his shoulders and kisses his eyelids. He lets his body drift and sway: a boat hitched to a dock by its mooring line. Nothing touches him. The only sound is the current of his pulse.

In the quiet, his father's figure emerges, standing a ways away from the hanging sheets, where the creek runs: the silhouette of a toy soldier at the end of their makeshift hallway. Jamie is in his green-gray fatigues and service cap, and he has the tarp and shoestrings that had been their tent bundled on his shoulder. Purple deadnettle and blue morning glories reach to his knees. He looks upward at a window on the second story. There is Gabrielle, emotions indiscernible, withdrawing from the window's glass back into her bedroom.

Quinno wishes he could have known what his father was thinking: if there was some inkling in Jamie's mind that told him that this would be the last time that he would ever see his daughter, or their house: that this would be the last normal day of their lives.

“He saw it as a vacation,” Quinno hears Gabrielle say.

His mind steals to an older Gabrielle, across their oak dinner table in the two-story. His sister's features are sharpened by an orange pendant lamp, her lips set in a snarl. A ring of light encircles paper plates of stale biscuits and overripe fruit left by Matilda.

Their mother is somewhere upstairs, footsteps pacing in the shape of an ellipse.

Their father is dead, and they have just returned from his funeral. Quinno is eleven and Gabrielle is eighteen. His sister has kept this particular snarl for three days: ever since they followed the taps of their mother's heels into the basement of Mr. Church's funeral home and saw Jamie's body bag, undecorated and on a bed of steel in the morgue.

“He saw it as a vacation, with a little war on the side,” Gabrielle adds. Her head is propped on her laced fingers. She is in one of Matilda's dresses: a brown one patterned in flowers, because their mother never wears black. “He left us because he wanted to.”

“You don't know what you're talking about,” younger Quinno quips. He cuffs the sleeves of Jamie's only suit, hardly filling the stiff maroon material. He nibbles on a biscuit. It is too hard to chew. He goes for a nectarine and unearths its pit with his teeth. Spits the pit to land on the table.

Gabrielle picks the pit off of the wood and sets it on her own plate, the rest of her food uneaten.

Quinno remembers his mother's face when Mr. Church had unzipped his father's body bag, murmuring something in Matilda's ear. He heard the clinking of teacups, the scraping of metal against metal from a cut-open cardboard box. Quinno was too short to see what his mother saw. He glimpsed her lipstick, cracked by her anguished smile, as she looked into the box and at what was left of her husband.

She had gone and started to smack Jamie right on his chest, as if he could feel it.

Quinno thought that his father's heart might restart.

Mr. Church and Gabrielle had held Matilda's fists to stop her.

“Daddy died good, right?” Younger Quinno asks. His nectarine is mealy. Inedible.

“No,” Gabrielle says. She pauses. “Do you know what it means when soldiers are dishonorably discharged?”

He nods no. Sets his pitted nectarine on his plate.

“Their families don't get shit. We don't get shit,” Gabrielle says.

The image of Gabrielle blurs. At first, there is nothing: the gray of his eyelids, the unvarying sea. But Quinno then sees sparks, catching on rays of light that break in his inner depths. His limbs intertwine a school of fish. He hears the tender hum, the silver bells, of Matilda's voice in a far corner of his mind.

Get up.

A loud knock. Quinno pushes himself up from the tub. Flips his hair backward to clear his vision. He sprays droplets onto the bathroom's shiplap walls.

Kenny's bandanaed head pokes through the cracked bathroom door. Five white horses gallop the blue expanse of his forehead. The top half of his face is consumed by amber lenses. “Are you alive?”

Quinno lets loose a string of coughs. The fluorescent bar is harsh. Obnoxious. “What?”

“Are you breathing? You've been in here for twenty minutes.”

“I'm breathing. You've been here for twenty minutes?”

Kenny snickers. “Yeah. And your breakfast is getting cold.”

Quinno knuckles his eye sockets. Rakes his nails over his scalp. The rose oil's worked. Somewhat. “What's going on?”

“Your sister asked me to check up on you.” Kenny plops a towel and a pair of Quinno's undershorts on the floor planks. “Said she'll probably work late tonight.”

“Thanks.” Quinno folds his thighs up to his chest. They're speckled. Bruises travel up his left hamstring: their needlepoints pins on a map of green and yellow countries.

“You look like shit,” Kenny says.

“Are you done?”

“Do you need help?”

“No.” Quinno squeezes the excess water from the ends of his hair.

“Fair enough.” Kenny moves to shut the door, though it opens again. “Your doctor is here, by the way.”

“Alright.”

Kenny examines him. “You're sure you don't need help?”

“Yes.”

The door slams.

Quinno loosens the bathtub’s plug and basks in the tepid water until most of it has drained. The plug settles. He anchors the tub’s sides and raises himself. Every joint in his body cracks. His head blazes at his full height.

He places one foot at a time onto the floor planks. Nudges Matilda’s oil bottle toward the wall. Towels his hips.

The mirror cabinet above the sink, brushed of its moisture by his skinny fingers, shows him his father. Quinno looks older, weathered to the bone by his illness. His cheekbones jut out and his upper lip is tight on his teeth. His hair is a tangle of underbrush. The first four rows of his ribs branch outward from his sternum, their skin tissue paper.

Quinno takes Gabrielle’s wooden comb from the cabinet and runs it along his hair, careful so as to not disturb the scab on his temple. He sees the tubal veins in his arms, the cavernous indentations of where his ligaments end and his muscles begin.

Knots gather at the hair ends. He claws at them harshly. Entire clumps of brittle tumbleweeds are grouped in his palms, the comb molting him like a razor-blade. He dumps the clumps in the sink.

To say that his hair is his pride would be an understatement. It is one of the few things he has yet to lose: memory that cannot be so easily lost or sold away. It has soaked up hundreds of days of creek water and woodsmoke. His mother's kiss, the rose oil.

Quinno brings a few strands up to his nose. He inhales their rose blossom. Tries to split the knots at their ends. He is unsuccessful.

Let go.

"Enough," he says. He takes a pair of scissors from the cabinet. Divides the great stalks of his hair into two sections. Right at his nipple, Quinno fists one half and sandwiches his hair in the scissor's blades. Looks into his father's eyes.

What else is there to preserve?

He nods. Cuts straight across. Does the same to the other half. His leftover hair springs upward from his head like a watered plant. Physically, he feels lighter: his face less gaunt.

Quinno lays his cut hair into two neat columns on the toilet tank. They are dark: the soil of two freshly packed graves.

His hands shake, but he ignores it. He can't think about it.

Quinno towels his shorter hair until it is suitably dry. Runs the comb a final time over his scalp and returns it to its place in the cabinet, along with the scissors. He dresses in his undershorts, their elastic loose on his sunken stomach. He limps from the bathroom.

Immediately, Quinno is hit with the salty rich smell of cooking meat.

In the Moores' kitchen-living room-dining room, Dr. Whitlock hunches in one of the two plastic dining chairs next to their Formica table. From his leather duffel bag on the floorboards, he unloads his familiar suitcase of syringes and other medical supplies, as well as groceries, onto the table. More than he has already brought to the Moores in the last two weeks: several cans of

mixed vegetables and fruits, vienna sausages, and beans. A fresh loaf of bread, eggs, salt and pepper shakers, flour, sugar, butter, and, to Quinno's delight, a Hershey bar.

"Gave yourself a trim, did you?" Dr. Whitlock stacks his cans neatly on the table.

To Quinno's left, Kenny peels apart a package of bacon and lays slices in a cast iron pan on the stove. Cooked sausage steams on one of Matilda's finer plates on the kitchen island. Biscuits on another.

Kenny's eyebrows leap to the tops of his lenses. He whistles.

"Had to cut off the dead ends," Quinno says.

"Dead ends? Half your head's gone," Kenny says.

"It was already falling out."

Dr. Whitlock sucks his teeth. "Unfortunately, that can happen."

"Why do you smell like a garden?" Kenny grabs a disk of sausage and finishes it in too few bites. Quinno ignores him and limps to the empty plastic chair.

Dr. Whitlock offers Quinno the Hershey bar and clucks his tongue. "You ought to start putting some of that weight back. Get you some of that sausage, too." He stands and nudges his stacks of cans beneath his chin. Passes Kenny. "Spent a good bit on it. Wouldn't do to let Jamie Moore's kid get all scrawny, now."

It's too late for that, Quinno thinks. He is grateful that his undershorts have their elastic.

Dr. Whitlock slides his cans to dwell in the upper maple cabinets. Organizes them in all their proper spots like he's been living there in the cabin for a long time: because he practically has been, arriving every other morning at eight, on the dot. Just as he promised. Just like today.

On his fourth visit, Dr. Whitlock had told Quinno and Kenny over a poker game of betted jelly beans about how he and Jamie Moore had shared a few classes at Newland High. And a few girlfriends. It was inevitable, in the small town of Newland.

Matilda, then Fairbourne, had dated Dr. Whitlock first, he being one of the three boys available in their graduating class. They were regular attendees of the school's band, both of them obo players. They had sat next to one another in their five-player orchestra pit for three years, linking their pinkies under their music stands.

Quinno's last name would have been Whitlock, and his hair would have been that same shade of nuclear blond, if Matilda hadn't broken it off with Dr. Whitlock in their senior year and gone to their formal with Jamie. Jamie was, in the opinion of their graduating class, much more handsome than Dr. Whitlock. And more athletically adept. Their yearbooks said so.

"When you're as beautiful as your mama was, you can do whatever you want," Dr. Whitlock said. He offered up five cinnamon jelly beans for the ante. "But it didn't keep Jamie and I from being good friends. We both skipped out on romance for a little while anyway and joined the Army as soon as we graduated. It's what you do, when you have nothing. We kept in touch when I left my assignment as a medic."

"Why'd you decide to leave?" Quinno asked.

Jamie stayed in the Army for the better part of two decades, eventually rising to the rank of captain. He'd gone on to be stationed everywhere, from a base Quinno never learned the name of in Korea, to the U.S. embassy in Colombia, and finally, to the warfront in Vietnam.

Quinno pulled the nine of diamonds and the four of clubs, and folded. He was no good at poker.

“I broke my leg. Met Beatrice in a M.A.S.H. in Gangwon. We eventually married. Beatrice became pregnant with Michael’s older brother, John. I wanted to watch him grow.” Dr. Whitlock popped the cinnamon jellies in his mouth. “And your father and I, we missed fighting the Germans by three years. Korea was—” He hesitated, as if his mind had temporarily ventured off into some faraway place. “Boring. Not all that we thought it would be.”

Quinno peels back the wrapper of his Hershey bar and separates a square for himself. Wonders what is might taste like melted into some milk.

“Well I'll be,” Dr. Whitlock says. “This is Jamie’s, right?”

Hooked on Dr. Whitlock’s forefinger, Jamie’s canteen cup dangles, gleaming underneath the stove's range hood. The cup is standard U.S. military and built to hold about three cups worth of instant coffee. It looks as though two regular cups were welded together and the middle carved and hammered out.

“I use it for cooking,” Quinno says. He clears his throat. “Kenny, put some milk on. The meat’s gonna sting me going down.”

“Try a biscuit.” Kenny flips the bacon and drains the excess lard into a mug. He takes the canteen cup and cages it in a burner. Blue flames lick up its sides. He grabs a jug of milk from the icebox next to the back door and twists the lid. Pours a measure for one.

“My father used to have one of those cups, out in our shed,” Dr. Whitlock says. He scrubs his hands fiercely in the Moores' kitchen sink. Flicks them into the basin. “Had one of my own, too. From the Tomahawks. I called it the kidney bean, for its shape.” The doctor takes the plates of sausage and biscuits and serves them on the Formica table.

Quinno halves a biscuit and sandwiches a disk of the meat. Leans back in his chair and offers up his bruised thigh. The sausage is spicy: stings extra on the way to his stomach. He chews slowly, his stomach no longer accustomed to the weightiness of solid foods.

Dr. Whitlock sits and scoots his chair closer to Quinno until their knees touch. Flips open his suitcase of syringes. “My father got his cup in Nancy, France, while fighting the Germans in the trenches. You know what I am referring to, right?” He drenches a cotton ball in alcohol and rubs it on Quinno’s thigh. Screws a needle onto the barrel of a syringe and pierces the cap of antibiotic fluid. Extracts the last bit from the bottle.

The doctor’s breath is minty. Quinno nods. He knows the trenches were used in the World Wars.

“Foxholes,” as Jamie had once said, leaned on his reading bench in the living room of the blue two-story, “can house two, three men at a time. Trenches, however, were much bigger and fortified by sandbag walls: stacked as tall as a man, if not taller. They housed hundreds of boys for months, leaving them with rotten feet.” Jamie's bookshelves touched the ceiling between their old windows, conveying their vanillin throughout the living room. It was close to Christmastime, and the tops of the shelves were adorned in holly-berry garlands. In place of consuming a T.V. dinner, his father annotated a moulded book of verse in his La-Z-Boy: *The Cherry Orchard*, according to the book’s spine.

Quinno was nine, watching an episode of *Rat Patrol* while lounged on his quilt on the floor. He had asked Jamie about what the men on *Rat Patrol* were doing: how they could possibly achieve their goals and keep their lives, given their poor decisions. A group of soldiers on the T.V. were in charge of transporting an explosive device and destroying a German radar station on the far side of a mountain, in a desert. The men had dug no foxholes or trenches, as

Quinno had seen in other Army films and shows. They had nothing but their wits to protect them, and a blind woman who directed them to traverse a dried up riverbed to get to their destination.

Jamie pointed his pen to the T.V. “To dig a trench takes an extensive amount of time. It is considered better in some situations to rely on the environment. Though the environment can work against you, too. The crest of a mountain can be a vantage point.” He gestured to the character of Sergeant Troy, viewing the German station through binoculars on the screen. “It may also be a trap. Nature is cruel, this way.” Jamie went back to writing in his book.

Quinno knew vaguely that his father had been somewhere hot recently: hot enough to tan him like the *Rat Patrol*. Colombia. He wanted to ask him more questions: about whether or not captains in Colombia got fancy long guns like Sergeant Troy, or if he'd ever smuggled a bomb.

He'd turned his head again and seen Jamie, shaking while he wrote. Flinching when the men on the T.V. shot their guns.

Quinno didn't say another word. He turned away, and focused on his show. Heard the distinct snap of Jamie's tobacco tin.

Dr. Whitlock flicks the barrel of the syringe and gathers a bead of antibiotic onto the tip of its needle. “The cup came with a matching flask. When we were young, your father and I used to take it down from the shelf and fill it with water from a stream near my daddy’s home. Let it bubble until it was full and pour it out. Pretend to drink from it while nestled in the rocks like cowboys in a saloon.” He chuckles.

The syringe pierces Quinno’s thigh. It is the eighth time he’s felt its chill, and yet he still jumps. He finishes his sausage.

“Funny how we all end up doing the same things.” Dr. Whitlock’s chuckling fades into a glum expression. He removes the syringe and rubs his cotton ball on the wound.

Quinno sits silently, not knowing whether it is appropriate to laugh at the doctor’s words. He supposes Dr. Whitlock is telling him this because he sees Quinno the same way: as a child playing pretend with his father’s materials, as all older folks tend to do.

Dr. Whitlock picks apart his syringe and wipes his needle. Screws the caps on his cotton ball and alcohol jars and tucks them next to the other syringes. The antibiotic jar is promptly tossed into the Moores' trashcan. It shatters like one of Grampa Leed’s beer bottles.

Kenny clicks the heat off the stove and collects bacon onto another fine plate. Pours steaming milk into a mug and carries everything to the Formica table. He chews a slice of the bacon and grips Quinno’s chair.

Quinno grimaces at the fatty juice on his mother’s finer china. He clips a chunk of chocolate off of his bar and drops it into his mug. Watches the white milk swirl.

“That it?” Kenny asks.

“That’s it,” Dr. Whitlock says. He zips his suitcase into his duffle bag, the leather flat and defeated-looking.

Quinno sips his milk and sputters when Kenny slaps his back.

“Looks like you’re all fixed up, Quinoa. Ready to march up Brown,” Kenny says.

Quinno coughs and laughs out short wisps of air.

Dr. Whitlock smiles, though his glumness returns to him quickly.

It’s odd. Shouldn’t the doctor want to celebrate? Quinno catches his breath. He posits that the doctor’s sudden demeanor is for the worst: that Dr. Whitlock will now tell him that he has

stopped his treatment really because he is beyond repair: that his symptoms will resurface, harsher than the first time, and finish him in one sweep.

Dr. Whitlock bows his head, the lightbulb above him casting a halo of light on his white head. “You know your father was one of the best shots I ever seen? He shot a magpie out of midair, once. Twenty feet up.”

Quinno eyes Kenny, sharing a look of astonishment.

“Not Mr. Moore,” Kenny says, sarcastically.

Quinno recalls a seven-year-old Kenny having his arms guided by Jamie. They aimed Grampa Leed's Smith & Wesson Model 10 into the woods, and shot together a bottle at fifteen yards.

“Yes, Mr. Moore. Can I see that cup again?” Dr. Whitlock points to Jamie’s canteen cup sitting on the stove. Kenny rounds the kitchen island, picks up the cup by its flat handle, and sets it on the Formica.

“You want something to drink?” Kenny asks. “It’s the least we could do.”

“No, no. I assume you intend to use this on the mountain? Jamie showed you how to use it in a real fire, right? And how not to set brush ablaze?” Dr. Whitlock turns the cup in his hands. Holds it by its upper edges to protect himself from its heat. He peers into it like a soothsayer reading tea leaves.

“He did,” Quinno says. “Showed us both.” He gulps the rest of his milk. Thumbs dry the corners of his mouth. “You said my father was a good shot?”

“Sure was,” Dr. Whitlock says.

“Grampa’s got one of them cups,” Kenny adds. “Got his in France, too. Though I don't remember the city.”

“They’ll cook you both a nice meal on Brown, then.” Dr. Whitlock places the cup on the table. He leans back in his chair and crosses his legs. Interlaces his hands around his bent knee. His frown morphs into a look of consternation on his features.

Quinno glimpses the thick scar flowing out from the hem of the doctor’s black trousers. It is red: deep as a river basin, as if parted by Moses himself.

“You know, I've never seen Grampa pick up his revolver save for one time, to hunt us a turkey,” Kenny says. “He was terrible at it. He says you should only kill what you intend to eat.”

“And yet he'd been a soldier,” Quinno adds.

Kenny snickers. “Yeah.”

Dr. Whitlock doesn't lose his look of consternation. He points to the canteen cup. “You notice how their design hasn’t changed in fifty years?” He sits up and flicks the cup’s steel. It rings.

Quinno and Kenny exchange another look.

“Neither have the young who’ve fought with them. Died with them. You two could be that young, with this war still going on. Eaten, like Jamie,” Dr. Whitlock says. “Having these cups might be useful, but they ain’t good to get. You understand?”

Kenny grabs another disk of sausage and chews.

Quinno watches a drop of milk drip from the cup’s rim to the table. The last time he had watched the news on Grampa Leed’s T.V., Walter Cronkite had been on the screen reporting that Northern Vietnam had further infiltrated into the South. He’d said that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam would likely be able to sustain the war for another three years. Kenny would be eighteen in two years.

“Jamie wasn’t that young,” Quinno says.

“Yes, he was,” Dr. Whitlock answers. “Wars have the same conflicts, different colors. Different flags, empty cups, again and again. Each of them is fed by the young.”

Jamie wasn’t young when he went to Vietnam, Quinno wants to argue. Compared to all of the poor teenagers who wanted to put food on their family’s tables and go to school, his father very much would have seemed an anomaly: an old man and not naive in the slightest. Jamie had been a captain, after all, when he was deployed to the Hậu Nghĩa Province, right along the border of Cambodia.

Quinno huffs. There is Jamie, the toy soldier, standing in the sheets.

“Have I upset you?” Dr. Whitlock asks.

Kenny snorts.

He doesn't know.

Quinno picks the ends of his hair. “No. You just don’t understand.”

“Your father was a good man. A good man caught up in something a lot bigger than either of us knew. Fulfilling the dreams of powerful people who didn’t give two shits about us,” Dr. Whitlock says.

Quinno grabs another biscuit and breaks it apart. He remembers Gabrielle's snarl. In the morgue. At their dinner table in the two-story. The day after their father's funeral, she let him read the coroner's report.

Jamie Moore had originally gone to Vietnam to fulfill the final two years of his service. He had used his title and requested to go, to see a part of the world he hadn’t been to yet. While there, however, he'd gone on and committed himself to cowardice, and later full-fledged desertion. He ran from the Hậu Nghĩa Province up to the DMZ.

He saw it as a vacation.

After he'd been formally discharged, he'd been found months later by the ARVN in the Quảng Trị Province: hundreds of miles from where he ought to have been. He was returned home with needle marks in the crooks of his elbows and a bullet in his pancreas.

"Quinno?" It's Kenny, shaking his shoulder.

No, it is himself. Trembling. Kenny hasn't touched him.

"You don't know nothing about Jamie," Quinno says.

"Your daddy was a scholar," Dr. Whitlock says. "An incredibly smart man and ahead of everyone. If more people thought like him, the world would be easier to live in. More boys in your generation would be alive."

Quinno bites his knuckle. He can't stop his shaking.

Maybe a switch flipped. Maybe Jamie lost his mind. It didn't matter. He had left his family behind. Died without a gun in his hand, like he didn't even put up a fight.

Quinno imagines Kenny in Jamie's green-gray service uniform. A service cap in place of his bandana.

More boys in their generation would be alive if Jamie had stayed put.

"That's enough," Kenny says.

Dr. Whitlock stands. The legs of his chair scrape the floor. He tugs his coat tighter around himself. Grips his duffel bag. "Jamie was a good man," he says, definitively, in a way Quinno knows is meant to comfort him. "He would want me to watch out for you."

"We watch ourselves," Kenny says.

Dr. Whitlock's face softens. "I know."

Quinno wonders whether he should show the doctor the other contents shipped alongside his father's body bag, including the box of painted Vietnamese porcelain dogs with which Jamie

stuffed full of dope. Or the one dog that Jamie had apparently held in his dead fist, unfired, with his prints permanently etched into its red bottom.

Quinno eventually found these materials at the top of his mother's closet in the cabin, before it was Gabrielle's closet, collecting spiders in their empty inner cavities. Just before his fourteenth birthday.

"I think Quinno ought to rest some more," Kenny says.

"I'm alright," Quinno tries.

"You ain't alright," Kenny quips. He gestures to the front door and corrals the doctor.

Dr. Whitlock moves his lips, as if to say something else. Nothing comes forth.

Quinno follows them through the cabin and out the front door, onto the porch. Matilda's porcelain cross swings.

The doctor hobbles down the brick steps, dragging his duffel bag to sit on the gravel. "Call me when you two plan on going up Brown. Should be sometime soon. Get you your exercise. And tell your sister I said hello," he says, from the bottom of the steps.

Quinno nods. Kenny spits.

"Y'all take care." The doctor goes to tip a hat he doesn't have on.

Quinno and Kenny watch him crunch to his chestnut Mustang parked under the Moores' red maple, and drive away.

Was his father a good man? In some ways, yes. It is obvious to Quinno that Jamie loved him: enough to have been gentle with his mother and sister, and been a good neighbor to those living around the two-story by offering to teach their children to hunt and shoot. He had hugged his children and kissed them goodnight every so often. Had shown Quinno how to fend for

himself, cook over open fires, and make a shelter out of what the land provided: as if he already knew he would one day leave him.

But how can he say that he was good, how could anyone say that he was good, when Quinno considers all that his father forfeited in his cowardice? His title, his remaining time with his wife and children, and, ultimately, his life. And what for?

He left us because he wanted to.

"The fuck was that about?" Kenny reaches into the breast pocket of his jean jacket and takes out his pack of cigarettes. Lights one on his trench lighter. He takes a hit.

"Who knows?" Quinno swallows bile. Pretends the wetness in his eyes is from the wind. He shivers in the cool morning air. Looks up at the haint blue painted on the underside of the overhang, matching the teal sky. He holds his palm open to Kenny. He could use a cigarette.

The blond shoos him away. "I got something better for you. A medicinal herb."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, man. Go put on some pants."

It takes six tries, six waves from the arm of the battery gauge, for the engine of Grampa Leed's red Mercury pickup to start.

Quinno waits patiently, picking the skin of his pinky while Kenny toys with his grandfather's keys, leather keychain twinkling.

The maroon bench beneath them purrs. The battery gauge waves sporadically. Quinno and Gabrielle's cabin and their short gravel driveway shrink in the windshield's middle.

Kenny reverses out onto Route 181 and turns toward the center of town, and the Blue Ridge rises up from the asphalt. Venus fades in the north. The rising sun is subdued by a layer of citrus clouds.

Quinno shivers.

“It was a bit warmer the last time you were outside the house, huh?” Kenny laughs, rolls his window up, and turns the dial for the temperature of the pickup from C to H. He readjusts his bandana to the middle of his forehead.

Quinno fastens his flannel to its top button. The heat seeps out of the Mercury’s vents. “Sure was,” he says. His breaths fog up the window glass.

“Or you’ve just gotten puny,” Kenny jeers.

Quinno sneers and leans his elbow on the armrest. The silver maples and fir trees have begun to change their colors. Their topmost leaves are a pleasant, golden sunshine. Were the morning not so cold, he’d have told Kenny to keep the windows down so that he might smell their familiar autumn rot: that mixture of rain and chlorophyll that he yearns for every year.

“Leaves have started to change. You see that?” Quinno says. He’s seen their metamorphosis many times before. Fifteen times, to be exact. But this time, they are magnificent. The colors new and rare.

“I do. They’ll be at their peak in about a week. It’d be a good time to go up Brown, then. Give us a lot to see,” Kenny says.

The tree line breaks and they pass a few dilapidated barn houses and wayward roan cows chewing on wild wheat. Squished ranch homes stand several yards further back, close to the earth: their shuttered windows squinting at them like they’re encroaching strangers.

Quinno grabs at the denim over his knees. Lifts the hems. His thighs are the width of his fists.

"I was just kidding about your size, man. You look just fine." Kenny lights another cigarette and blows a puff of smoke into the cabin. Twenty more butts stick out from a red glass ashtray on the dashboard like the ugliest flower Quinno's ever seen.

"Reach in my bag, there. Open that folder," Kenny slurs around his cigarette.

From a brown rucksack on the bench, Quinno removes a manila folder and flips it on its front. He reads the scribbled signatures of their teachers, Mr. Bradshaw and Mrs. Cornell. A short note wishes him well. Inside the folder, there are two assignments written on lined paper, and a book. *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare.

"Mrs. Cornell says you gotta have that read by next Friday," Kenny says, pointing at the portraits of a man and woman printed on the book's cover. The woman's face overlaps the man's and her orange hair, curled and braided about her face, is vibrant, neon, above the indigo background. "And those math problems are due Monday."

"Fuck me." Quinno falls back against the pickup's bench and stares at the Coca-Cola spattered ceiling.

"It ain't that bad. It's short," Kenny says.

In his mother's Bible, now wrapped in linen beneath his bed, Quinno had at one time read alongside a preacher during an All Hallow's Eve sermon that the apocalypse would start when brother would deliver brother unto death.

He supposes it has begun. "You told them I was well?"

"You didn't die, bud. This is the consequence. Next time you ought to try and die a little harder."

Quinno thumbs through the pages of the book. Counts the page numbers of his math problems. “You wanna help me out? Gimme a few answers?”

“Sure, but I can’t read a book for you.”

“Then give me a summary.”

Kenny takes a right off of the fork at Linville St. and passes onward from 181 onto Watauga St., up a hill. The road becomes narrow and trees scrape the sides of the truck, flaking off its paint.

Kenny exhales another cloud of smoke. “So this older guy, Romeo, is a total creep, right? Wants to fuck his cousin, Rosalind. She don’t let him, so he finds this other young girl, Juliet, to get with instead. They end up doing it in secret.”

“Why in secret?” Quinno asks. He closes his class materials and shoves them back into the rucksack.

“Cause their families don’t like each other. And he’s old as shit,” Kenny says.

“Where’s it take place?”

“On a street in a city called Verona.” Kenny stamps out his cigarette in the glass ashtray.

“Where’s that? South Carolina?”

“No, Italy. They’re European.”

Quinno sniffs. “Didn’t know they had problems like that over there.”

“How do you mean?”

“Thought cousin-fucking was for the boonies.”

Kenny snorts. “Maybe Verona is the boonies of Italy.”

They both laugh, hard, and Kenny briefly takes his foot off the gas. The truck halts slightly, and they're both tossed forward. The ashtray flings itself from the dashboard and collides with their bench, coating the boys in its soot. They laugh even harder.

Toward the end of Watauga, they pass over a rickety bridge. Fallen leaves and fishermen come into view and are scattered on the rocks of the skinny North Toe River. A fox and her two cubs dart in the road, several yard ahead at the bridge's end. They leap into the forest on the other side.

Across the bridge, Kenny takes the pickup five yards from the bank of the river. The beige single-wide mobile home that he and his grandfather share stands at an angle on the earth. A wooden porch and it stilts puncture into slate and clay. Oxblood shutters next to square windows fade in the sun.

Kenny shifts the truck into park. Machinery grinds and the axel under the truck cabin lurches on flattened dirt spread just far enough to accommodate the width of the wheels. The boys step out onto tall grass.

Quinno hears the shallow river passing rocks, the spinning of the fishermen's lures.

"The story for Mrs. Cornell is similar to the one Grampa told me about the Toe," Kenny says.

Kenny tugs his rucksack from the bench. It thuds on the ground. The boys each take turns spooning soot and cigarette butts out from the bench and into the grass. Kenny shoves the ashtray back in its proper place.

The lines of the fishermen's lures glint in the morning sunlight, like Christmas tinsel.

“The lady it’s named after, Estatoe, was a lot like Juliet. She was the daughter of a powerful chief. Fell in love with the wrong kind of guy, too,” Kenny says. He leads them up the hill, crushing wilted wildflowers.

Quinno recalls younger versions of themselves squatted on the river stones trying to catch the fish swimming between them at sunset in log traps. The water had been cool around their ankles, perfect to stay the summer heat.

They march up the wooden steps of the porch and pass through the metal door of the single-wide into the Leeds' living room-kitchen. An episode of *Banacek* about a missing football player sounds from a black-and-white T.V. Its box's antennae rival a cockroach.

Grampa Leed snorts on a cocked La-Z-Boy, undisturbed. A ball cap hides his pudgy nose.

Kenny’s rucksack thumps a dark carpet floor that sounds hollow, like a drum, under their booted feet. There are beer cans in a pyramid, magazines of half-naked women, and an opened tackle box strewn about.

Grampa Leed coughs, dispersing the scent of liquor into the stuffy air.

“She was either Cherokee or Catawba,” Kenny continues. “Her man was whatever she was, but the opposite. In one version of the story, like in Shakespeare’s, their families don’t condone their relationship, so they drown themselves in the Toe.”

Quinno coughs. Kenny pushes his lenses up to his bandana and crosses the small space to a kitchenette. From within the only wall cabinet not missing its door, he reaches past a set of plates and retrieves a tin stash box. On the tin’s lid, a naked devil whips a cowboy hat into the air in the center of a desert. The horse under him is caught mid-stride, its nose up to a red sky.

Kenny tucks the tin under his arm. “In another version of the story, the families learn to get along and the couple is wedded.” Next to Grampa Leed, a half bent billiard pipe lays on the La-Z-Boy’s armrest. Kenny pinkies charred tobacco leaves from the pipe’s bowl into the kitchen sink. He nudges Quinno back outside, onto the porch.

Kenny flips open the tin. He crushes a bit of dope into the pipe bowl. Tucks the tin into a back pocket of his jeans. His trench lighter reappears and he produces a flame. He touches the flame to the bowl repeatedly, igniting the dope and sucking in air in tiny bursts until his chest is plump and full. He exhales, a cloud forming between them. “We might meet them this weekend,” Kenny spurts. “They could be a part of the Lights, too. We’re close enough.”

“What makes the families change their minds?” Quinno asks.

“Estatoe gets them to share a bowl.” Kenny smiles before taking another hit. The dope embers in the pipe glow, like pottery in a kiln, each time Kenny sucks in.

They’d thaw his core, Quinno thinks.

Kenny offers him the pipe, the smoke snaking in his lenses. “Don’t waste it, now. Shit was expensive.”

Quinno puts the pipe to his lips. Kenny touches it with his lighter and Quinno sucks in, filling his lungs to very bottom of his diaphragm.

After the first hit, he takes a second. And a third.

“It was probably a bit too soon,” Quinno hears Kenny say, though it sounds far away, reverberating in his head. He is dropped onto something hard. There is a woman in a leather catsuit. On a *PLAYBOY* poster surrounded by blue. May 1971. She has blond hair.

This is Kenny’s room. Specifically, his cot.

"You hit that way too hard, man." Kenny's face blocks out the woman. Whatever heat within Quinno splinters into a bitter, cold shame. It prods at the blood vessels swelling in his eyes. Is he crying?

"Take it easy," Kenny says. Quinno is on his side on Kenny's cot. The breeze of his floor fan is cool on his face.

Kenny dips a cup of water towards his lips and Quinno jerks. The window is cracked and the Toe spumes.

"Take it easy. You should sleep it off," Kenny says.

Quinno agrees.

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Quinno hears the scraping of knives on whetstone. Men's voices screaming, singing, laughing. Pots boiling. Canteens clanking.

Flames and their smoke travel in great columns up into a night sky out of dug-out pits. The helmets of men crawl over the ground like box turtles.

Quinno is in one of the pits, a foxhole.

His father sits across from him at a bonfire: permanently thirty-eight in his uniform and shaved hair. His crooked teeth are chomped on a toothpick. He is using his knife to carve a dog's ear out of red clay. A pile of more clay lays molten between his knees.

Bulletfire peppers through the dense jungle where moonlight cannot touch.

Jamie sees him. Pours some opaque liquid from his dog's mouth into a canteen cup. He offers it to his son, white suns in his pupils.

Where is your gun? Quinno asks.

Jamie doesn't answer.

Quinno accepts the canteen. Gulps down the liquid.

The screaming and singing and knife sharpening are muzzled.

The fire crackles and grows until his father's image is consumed. The column of the flame shoots upward, into the sky, and orange stratosphere mushrooms above the trees.

Quinno is a child, his feet dipped into the Toe. The sun is low. He looks up, and there he expects to see Kenny crouched on the stones.

This is a memory.

Instead, Quinno sees a lone man and woman standing shin deep in the river. Their arms are the thin bark-covered branches of a tree. The woman's hair is plaited down the center of her head, and the man has no hair at all.

The woman raises her arm and a single finger at the end of one branch curls upward, beckoning.

What else is there to preserve?