5-2019

The craft of felt sense: writing sentences to create singular effects

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
English: Creative Writing

Examination Date: March 25, 2019

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Introduction

In 1842, Edgar Allen Poe's famous review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* appeared in *Grahams Magazine*, where he attempted to answer what he believes makes up a successful short story:

> A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or singular effect, to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents-he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one preestablished design. (298-299)

Poe defines a successful author of the short story as one who writes to create a singular effect, or felt sense, where a particular emotion is created in the reader. Every event, every sentence, every word aids in achieving this specific effect, and if it does not, the author fails. I agree with Poe that to make a successful short story, an author has to craft their story towards an effect, which mainly lies within the craft and flow of its prose. Because I value prose that creates a felt sense in the reader, the crafting of sentences is particularly important to me. In this paper, I will analyze the sentence style and techniques of a few of my favorite contemporary authors, including Jhumpa Lahiri, ZZ Packer, and Carmen Machado. More specifically, I will examine how they use syntax, the variation of short and long sentences, and rhythm to achieve a singular effect in a story.

Syntax

Brooks Landon, English Professor at the University of Iowa, writes in his book, *Building Great Sentences,* that to build great prose, the author must build great sentences. He writes about

how sentences work and how a writer can think about syntax to help their writing, focusing on the proposition, the smallest unit of a sentence. A proposition, in its most basic explanation, is a statement about reality that can either be accepted or rejected. For example, "I am hungry," contains several propositions, but for the sake of simplicity and space, two of these propositions are that first, there is an "I" in existence, and second, there is a condition called "hungry." Landon states that the way an author orders these propositions (i.e., through syntax or style of sentences) aids in creating a felt sense in the reader, just as Poe argues that the sentence is the first step in creating a singular effect. Landon writes, "Propositions carry emotional or affective impact…It is only when we consider the emotional effect of the way we order and combine the propositions that underlie the sentences we speak or write that we can consider ourselves in control of our writing" (34). For a writer to take full advantage of the emotional effect of propositions, Landon argues to place them at the end of the sentence because they catch the reader's attention and leaves the reader with the lasting emotional effect the writer is trying to create.

For example, in her short story "The Husband Stitch" from *Her Body and Other Parties*, Carmen Maria Machado leaves the reader with a felt sense of loneliness and isolation at the end by the order in which she states her propositions in the last sentence. In "The Husband Stitch," a woman wears a green ribbon around her neck that she refuses to allow anyone to touch. It is a source of great frustration for her husband throughout the story because he thinks that a wife should have no secrets from her husband. At the very end, the wife allows him to remove her ribbon, and her head falls off her body and rolls onto the floor. To create a felt sense of loneliness and isolation, Machado writes, "As my lopped head tips backward off my neck and rolls off the bed, I feel as lonely as I have ever been" (31). The entire story leads to this singular

effect of loneliness, but by using a left-branching sentence, where the propositions in the modifying phrase come before the propositions in the base clause, Machado ends with the felt sense she wanted: loneliness. This last sentence would have had a dramatically different effect had she written it as a right-branching sentence, where she ends on her modifying propositions, which might read something like: "I feel as lonely as I have ever been, as my lopped head tips backward off my neck and rolls off the bed." Written like this, the singular effect of loneliness is buried under the idea that the wife's head has just fallen off because if it comes at the end of the sentence, the reader focuses on the head. However, by leaving the wife's feelings at the end, the reader will hone in on those feelings of loneliness and isolation, which linger long after the book is put down.

Another example of ordering propositions to create a singular effect is Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies.* A collection of nine stories about the contemporary Indian immigrant set in India and America, *Interpreter of Maladies* shows the wide scope of human experience across continents and cultures through the tales of people who live seemingly ordinary lives. In the story that sets this collection in motion, "A Temporary Matter," Lahiri writes about a married couple who hardly speaks after the loss of their baby. The plot lies in a game of confessing secrets during the loss of their power while the electric company works to fix a downed line. Each night, the secrets increase in gravity, until finally, the wife tells the husband she wants a divorce and the husband tells the wife the gender of their lost infant, a secret the wife asked to never know. The end of this story reaches a singular effect of loss, and in order to create this effect, Lahiri relies on clear and stimulating prose through the order of propositions. In "A Temporary Matter," the last sentence is: "They wept together, for the things they now knew" (22). This sentence creates in the reader the singular effect of loss because of the way Lahiri has

ordered the propositions. The entire story builds and becomes more devastating as the married couple confess the many ways they have disappointed or hurt one other until the very end, where they unleash the worst secrets they have kept from each other. The way Lahiri structures the final sentence brings this idea together, letting the reader linger on the things the couple now knows. It would not have been as impactful if Lahiri had written: "For the things they now knew, they wept together," because what is most important and emotional in this sentence, in this story, are the secrets they have spilled to one another. The propositions in this final sentence are meant to cover the two biggest confessions the couple discloses: the desire for divorce and the revealing of the gender of their lost baby, or more accurately, the loss of a marriage and a son. By drawing the reader's attention to these ideas, built on the stepping stones of smaller secrets, Lahiri effectively creates a felt sense of loss.

A final example of ordering propositions to create the maximum felt sense is in ZZ Packer's *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, a collection of short stories that deal with a variety of issues, such as race, hate, and the lengths people will go for freedom, respect, and a sense of belonging. "Brownies," is a story filled with racism and hate, but one that ends in compassion and kindness in the face of cruelty. The story is told through the first-person point of view of Laurel, but she is not the main focus of the story. Laurel's main attention in her narration are two characters who are polar opposites of each other: Daphne, who is kind and quiet, and Arnetta, who is hateful and constantly scheming ways to cause trouble. In "Brownies," a group of black girl scouts are on their annual camping trip but are forced to camp in the same location as another troop, Troop 909, who are white. After calling the other girl scouts "caucasian chihauhuas" the day they arrive, Arnetta convinces her troop that the other girls used a derogatory term, and she schemes to teach the other troop a lesson. Daphne refuses to participate

in the plan, instead opting to clean up the mess the other girls have made. However, when Laurel's troop confronts Troop 909, they discover that they are mentally challenged, and the girl accused of saying the offensive word is mute. Instead of feeling ashamed for their actions, Arnetta and the rest of the troop proceed to complain about sharing the camp with mentally challenged girls. On the way home, Laurel tells a story about her father taking advantage of a Mennonite family by forcing them to paint his porch. After Arnetta asks if the family would take off their pants and give them to her if she asked, Packer ends the story with Daphne's words. Packer led the entire story to this moment, which reads, "And Daphne's voice, quiet, steady: 'Maybe they would. Just to be nice'" (31). After writing a story of flip-flopping cruelty and kindness, Packer ends on the word "nice." This instills in the reader a felt sense of compassion and understanding as Packer reveals that Laurel is starting to come of age and work through the hate and racism in the world. Packer writes that Laurel "suddenly knew there was something mean in the world that [she] could not stop," and this is where she reveals that Laurel is starting to understand Arnetta's hate. By ending on the word she does, Packer suggests that instead of hatefulness, Laurel will choose to be nice. Packer's last sentence would take on a different meaning if she had ordered her propositions in the last sentence differently. If it had read something like, "And Daphne's voice, quiet, steady: 'Just to be nice, maybe they would,"' the last word that the reader focuses on is "would". This does not hold nearly the same weight. Because she ends this sentence and story on the word "nice," the reader pays more attention and effectively feels a felt sense of kindness and compassion that Daphne exhibits over Arnetta's hate.

Variation of Sentence Structure

In addition to ordering propositions to create a specific emotional effect, the efficient flow of prose is necessary to create a singular effect in the reader. David Jauss argues in *On Writing Fiction: Rethinking Conventional Wisdom About the Craft* that to create effective flow, an author must vary the four basic types of sentence structures—simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. He writes, "A variety of sentence structure—and therefore of sentence length—will give our prose a more flowing, and appealing, landscape" (64). Alternating sentence structure will give a story better pacing, rhythm, and ultimately—flow. Similarly, in the classic *The Elements of Style,* William Strunk Jr. argues that sentences which do not vary with conjunctions or in structure are empty and weak (25). A succession of these types of sentences soon becomes monotonous and tedious, and just as Poe argued that a skillful literary artist is one who crafts every word to a pre-established singular effect, Strunk argues that an unskilled writer will sometimes construct a whole paragraph of empty or weak sentences. If an author finds that they have written a series of unvaried sentences, Strunk instructs, "Recast enough of them to remove the monotony. Replace them with simple sentences, sentences of two clauses joined by a semicolon, by periodic sentences of two clauses, by sentences, loose or periodic, of three clauses—whichever best represent the real relations of the thought" (26). Without varying sentences to create successful flow, a story will ultimately fail because it is badly written. Not only will the reader not want to finish it, but they will be so distracted with monotonous and weak prose that they will never acquire the effect the writer attempts to create in them.

An example of the importance in the variance of sentences to create efficient prose is in *ZZ* Packer's *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*. In Packer's short story "Geese," a woman lives in Japan with a group of multinational people who are unable to find jobs and are on the brink of

starvation. A story about the loss of innocence, the protagonist, Dina, eventually prostitutes herself for money. Packer uses varied sentence structure and syntax to create flow and rhythm within the story, which propels the reader forward to the end, where Packer instills the felt sense of a loss of innocence. An example of the way Packer varies her sentences are in the first few lines from this paragraph in "Geese": "By summer's end, both she and Ari found themselves unamused and jobless. She decided that what she needed, before resuming her search for another job, was a vacation. At the time, it made a lot of sense" (212-213). While the sentences are all complex in structure, the placement of the dependent clause varies, which provides better flow, translating to a more stimulating read. This aides in the reader arriving at the desired singular effect Packer is trying to translate in this story. Packer only moves the placement of the dependent clause to the middle sentence, but it makes a significant difference. If Packer had written the first three sentences with the dependent clause in the same place, it might read something like this: "By summer's end, both she and Ari found themselves unamused and jobless. Before resuming her search for another job, she decided that what she needed was a vacation. At the time, it made a lot of sense." While this is saying the same thing, the read is much more monotonous, which detracts away from the overall singular effect of the story—the felt sense of a loss of innocence—because the reading is choppy and distracting.

Another example of writing efficient prose to allow for felt sense, is Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies.* The variation of sentences from this paragraph in "A Temporary Matter" creates interesting and efficient prose: "They sat together until nine o'clock, when the lights came on. They heard some people across the street clapping from their porch, and televisions being turned on. The Bradfords walked back down the street, eating ice-cream cones and waving. Shoba and Shukumar waved back. Then they stood up, his hand still in hers, and went inside" (18). This

paragraph flows well because of the sentence variations, which are, in order, right-branching complex, compound, right-branching complex, simple, and middle-branching complex. Right-branching, meaning the modifiers are to the right of the independent clause, and middle-branching, meaning the independent clause is broken up by a modifier in the middle. In changing the location of the modifiers, Lahiri keeps her sentences flowing and easy to read. If she made them all right-branching complex sentences, the successive complex sentences would read like this: "They sat together until nine o'clock, when the lights came on…The Bradfords walked back down the street, eating ice-cream cones and waving…Then they stood up and went inside, his hand still in hers." Even with the compound and simple sentences in between, the paragraph becomes a little bit more monotonous to read because the modifiers are all in the same place. By placing the last modifier in the middle of the independent clause of the last sentence, Lahiri breaks up the tedium of all right-branching complex sentences, creating a more interesting landscape of prose. She goes even further by breaking up her three complex sentences with compound and simple sentences, placing a compound sentence in between the two right-branching complex sentences and a simple sentence in between the right-branching and middle-branching complex sentences. In doing this, Lahiri casts a variety of sentences throughout the paragraph, which creates better flow. It is easier and more enjoyable to read, propelling the reader forward to the end of the story, where she is able to instill the singular effect of loss.

A final example of well-written prose aiding in a singular effect is in Machado's "Real Women Have Bodies." In this story, a couple must deal with the pandemic of women gradually losing their bodies. The women still exist, but their bodies gradually fade until they are virtually nothing, like ghosts hovering in the air. At the end of the story, after her girlfriend has faded away, the main character returns to the dress store she used to work at and rips open the stitching

in the prom dresses, trying to release the women sewn in them. In the last paragraph, Machado writes: "'Please, go!' I scream, even as the security guard tackles me to the ground. From the blackness of the floor, I see them all, faintly luminous, moving about in their husks. But they remain. They don't move, they never move" (148). The ordering of the long and short sentences are as follows: complex, complex, simple, complex. By placing the single simple sentence after the two long, complex sentences, it slows the reader down, forcing them to focus on the fact that the women do not leave the dresses that they are sewn in, even though they have that option. The imagery Machado creates here of the women remaining in their dresses combines the ideas of bondage and domesticity, which are woven in with the sexuality and coming of age ritual of buying a prom dress. This binding of women's bodies to the prom dresses that they refuse to leave is a focus on women's containment within social norms. If Machado had combined the simple sentence with the complex one before it, the paragraph would read much differently. "'Please, go!' I scream, even as the security guard tackles me to the ground. From the blackness of the floor, I see them all, faintly luminous, moving about in their husks, but they remain. They don't move, they never move." Without separating "But they remain" into its own sentence, the reader would flow right past it and perhaps miss this singular effect Machado is trying to create. When the reader is jolted to a stop by a simple sentence of three words after reading two long and complex sentences, they are forced to focus on the fact that the women are not leaving the dresses, even though they have the option to. This makes the reader stop and wonder, allowing them to draw their own conclusions about bondage and women's assumed role in societal norms, from which it is difficult to break free, even when there is an opening.

Rhythm

In addition to creating flow with long and short sentences, Jauss also states that if authors fail to create rhythm with their words, they fail to create the appropriate emotion. He writes:

> Given that syntax is not just structure but a sequence—a *flow*—that generates 'dynamics of feeling,' it stands to reason that one purpose of syntactical variation is to convey rhythmically the emotion we wish to create in the reader. If we fail to create the appropriate rhythm, we will most likely also fail to convey fully the appropriate emotion—and that can have disastrous effects on the story as a whole. (70)

Jauss argues that the rhythm of the words in the sentence is just as important as the words themselves in creating singular effects in readers. He goes on to argue that the syntax of the words not only aids in the singular effect but can often imitate the experience that the words are describing. As an example, he uses a sentence from D. H. Lawrence's "Odour of Chrysanthemums" to capitalize stressed symbols and bold heavily stressed symbols to convey a sentence's rhythm, which I will attempt now, as I hear it, with one of Packer's sentences from "Geese." "Her speCIfic job was OPeRAtor of the **Diz**zy **Tea**cups ride, where, NESTled in gi**gan**tic **rep**licas of VicTORIan **tea**cups, **Jap**anESE kids **spun** and **arced** and **dipped** BEfore they were **whisked back** to cram school" (212). The first two-thirds of the sentence, where the kids are in the amusement park, follows a loose stressed/unstressed pattern of speech, which is indicative of being on such a ride, where reading the words feels like the spinning and dipping motion. In the last one-third of the sentence, the kids are not on the ride anymore, and instead of the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, there are two heavily stressed words near the end of the sentence, which creates a jarring effect on the reader. The sudden jolting emotion with these syllables is suggestive of what Dina probably feels when she loses her job because the kids are gone for the summer.

Another example of how the rhythm of words can imitate what the words are actually

saying to create a felt sense is in Machado's "Inventory" in *Her Body and Other Parties.* This story is about a woman taking inventory of all her past lovers during the outbreak of a disease. Machado writes, "Her HAIR GRAYED at the **temp**les and the WAY she **laughed tripped plea**sure **down** the **stairs** of my **heart**" (42). The heavily stressed words in the second half of this sentence stop and trip the flowing rhythm of the first half of the sentence, which is an imitation of tripping and falling down stairs. After tripping up the rhythm with "laughed tripped", the rest of the sentence follows a stressed/unstressed pattern of speech, which is indicative of falling down the stairs. In this sentence, Machado conveys the feeling of the protagonist falling in love with this person's laugh. By imitating the experience of tripping and falling down the stairs, the reader can feel the same sort of pleasure of being tripped up in the middle of the sentence and then gracefully fall through the rest of the sentence to end on "heart," just as the protagonist trips and falls for this person's laugh, eventually landing in love.

A final example of Jauss's idea of creating appropriate rhythm to create singular effects in the reader is Lahiri's "A Real Durwan" from her collection, *Interpreter of Maladies.* This story is about an elderly caretaker of a building in India: "It CAME **slapp**ing a**cross** the **roof** LIKE a BOY in **slipp**ers TOO BIG for **him** and **washed M**rs. **Dalal's lem**on **peels** INto the **gut**ter" (75). The rain slapping on the roof is imitated with the harshly stressed syllables placed erratically close together in the first half of the sentence. With the seemingly random harsh syllables sometimes placed directly next to each other and then sometimes broken up with an unstressed word, the first half of the sentence imitates the pattering of rain on a roof. By creating this experience of rain, Lahiri instills in the reader a felt sense of harshness, which sets the reader up to experience the singular effect of cruelty when the tenants throw the building's caretaker out at the end.

Conclusion

As Edgar Allen Poe has said, a successful story is one that is written well and achieves a singular effect in the reader, which lingers with them even after they finish the story. The author must master the craft of felt sense first at the sentence level. This can be accomplished through ordering the propositions so that every sentence garners the highest emotional impact, varying long and short sentences to keep paragraphs in a well-flowing landscape, and creating rhythm with words that imitate the experience in the sentence. In doing so, the author can construct a compelling and well-written literary tale, and these are the stories readers remember.

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Original Fiction

Amelia

No one usually bothered Amelia in her apartment, no one usually spoke to her on the stairs, but on the Friday she slated to spend the day staring at the uneven floorboards at the base of her couch, someone struck her door with such force, she was sure it would sail off its hinges. She wanted to answer it, but being so overcome with the affliction she coined “stillness,” she couldn’t find the will to stand. Instead she sat, staring not at the floorboards as she intended, but at the door, trying to decide if she should open it or wait for her visitor to bash it down or leave.

By the time she was ready to stand, she heard the receding footsteps, but not before she noticed the small scrap of paper forced through the crack under her door. She stood, overwhelmed by the immediacy of the moment; however, when she crossed halfway to the unassuming paper, she froze, overwhelmed again with stillness.

Amelia didn’t know what else to name her malady, but she never uttered a word of it to anyone else, never uttered a word of anything to anyone as she took her monthly trips to the grocery store, climbing on buses and paying for her food with the inheritance she received from her mother. She didn’t speak to her extended family anymore. She had ignored their phone calls and visits until they stopped altogether because she was tired of feeling ashamed of her stillness, cowering under her family’s glares as they branded her lazy.

But the truth was that, while her stillness made it seem like she was immobile and doing nothing, she was, in fact, doing everything. She was making lists and plans in her head, going over and over what her next move should be. She stood for hours, sometimes days, on end, carefully calculating what she should do next, inexhaustibly calculating which move would lead

to the next, so that the next step she took, she would be certain it was the right one. In this way, she thought she could plan her entire life and never be afflicted by hindsight.

She once stood for six hours with her hand on her doorknob trying to decide whether or not to go to her sister's funeral. By the time she decided going was the right thing to do and caught four different busses to get there, she had missed it. The funeral home was closed, and she stood outside the stubborn door that refused to let her in, trying to decide if she should go back home. She felt guilty, of course, for never having the chance to say goodbye, for never apologizing for keeping all of their mother's inheritance, to never again have the chance to make amends to Sarah's still body. Amelia used to love watching the way Sarah's lips pulled back to show her teeth in a smile that never seemed quite right because there never seemed to be an occasion that should solicit such happiness, such a free-flowing smile that covered Sarah's whole face as if she had never been that happy before and never would be again.

And she wouldn't.

The weak vessel in her brain stole first her smile, then her life. Amelia lay in bed some nights feeling her head with her fingers, trying to find a similar vessel that might pop open like a ketchup packet squeezed too forcefully, leaking blood into her brain like Sarah, like their mother.

The doctors who ran her CT assured her that was one inheritance she didn't receive, but that didn't stop her from trying to find one. When she didn't, she would go still, wondering if she was looking at the same view her mother and sister had at the end of their lives, the same popcorn style ceiling covered in tiny mountains. Sometimes she thought she could see little families hovering at the bases, smiling, happy, whole.

~

The decision facing Amelia now was that of the paper. She considered every pathway, every event that could occur if she picked up the small little note: who it could be from, what it might say. If it was from her aunt or cousins checking in for the first time in three years, if maybe it was a summons from a lawyer wanting her to make a statement about her mother's estate, or maybe it was from her two neighbors across the hall asking her to join their girl's night out. Then she considered every possible thing that could happen if she didn't, instead letting the paper lie on the floor forever, deteriorating into nothing. In the end, her curiosity about what the note might say overwhelmed her, and she picked it up, refusing to read the writing right away, instead fingering the thin threads that held the paper together, the uneven edges carelessly torn by her visitor, the scrawl indented on its face. But by the time she gathered the will to straighten back up, the sun had surrendered to the moon, and she was unable to read the coarse ink. She stood erect, staring at the shapes of the unlit lamps in her apartment, imagining the little families peeking down at her from their mountains, waiting for her to walk to her bedroom.

In the morning when the sun radiated through her window, casting a glittering light on her face, she opened her eyes and stared at her ceiling. How hard would it be to scrape off the popcorned paint? She imagined the sharp metal edge of a scraper, slicing through the little peaks and elevations, scattering white dust over her floors, over her sparse furniture, over her. The little families at the bases of the little mountains falling helplessly to the ground, flailing all the way until they hit their respective surfaces and go still, like Sarah, like her mother, like her. She focused on her little imaginary families until the paper floated into her thoughts like a dandelion she once blew in the breeze when she was young, and it struck her with abrupt force that the paper was not a dream. She plucked the note off her sheets and read the scrawl.

I'm your new neighbor. LD.

How strange it was that this person had stopped by to inform her of their existence. She had never been so brave to shout ceaselessly into a void but expect no answer: I am here. She waited for her new neighbor to come back, but LD didn't show that day.

Or the next,

or the next.

It was a full month before LD knocked on her door again, but this time, she was ready. Amelia had spent the time poised on her couch, deciding what to do, so when her visitor finally came back, pounding on the door like a set of drums that reverberated in her soul, she could open the door without hesitation. He was not what she expected.

She had pictured maybe an elderly woman, lonely from her husband's recent death, wanting to share stories with anyone who would listen. Or maybe a small child, eager to meet everyone in the building. Instead, LD stood before her, leaning against the doorframe as if he knew she would answer, wearing a shirt of pink silk tucked into shiny gray slacks. The wrinkles in his face were not deep, as if he had been smiling for less than 40 years. His hair looked wet, hanging over his forehead. Amelia assumed it had been awhile since he'd washed it.

Even though she was standing in the way, one hand on the door, the other on the doorframe, and even though she had yet to say anything to him, he pushed his way past her into the small living room, complete with a faded couch and coffee table, and even though she didn't ask, he introduced himself as Luke. She avoided his gaze but eventually whispered her name.

"No TV?" he said.

"I don't watch it. It raises your blood pressure."

"I was hoping to split the cable for a while. Think your neighbors got it? The ones across the hall?" he said, stepping back towards her, towards the door that would take him away from her apartment, from her.

"I don't know them," she said.

"You don't know your neighbors? You don't know who they are?"

"No," she said. "I don't talk to anyone."

"You're talking to me."

She stared at the floor where his boots connected to the surface, perpendicular to the grain in the wood, and imagined what the tread on the bottom of his boots looked like. She pictured the little rubber crevices, dipping in and out. Little mountains in their own right. "I suppose I am."

Luke flashed a smile. The wrinkles around his eyes deepened momentarily, and Amelia imagined what it would be like to trace her fingers along the edges. As abruptly as he came, he left her standing alone, staring through the empty door frame, trying to decide what to do next. She lingered, touching the edges of the heavy wooden door, slumping her fingertips against the blunted corners. She stood frozen, focusing on her breaths, allowing the stillness to take over. Surely this would slow her heart.

She never considered how long she had been suffering from stillness. Instead she remembered how she and Sarah cared for their mother after her stroke, feeding her blood thinners, limiting her intake of sodium, trans fats, and cholesterol in an effort to lower her blood

pressure, and instructing her to take deep breaths to calm her anxiety. She remembered how she no longer grew excited when her phone rang, when every time it was Sarah's voice on the other end reporting news of their mother's decline, so that Amelia's ringtone now sounded like the tolls of death singing in her ears. She remembered how the expanses of time that she would stand in her mother's living room after Sarah came to relieve her grew longer and longer, how she was afraid to leave in case she missed her mother's last breaths.

After her mother died, Amelia thought the stillness would pass, that she would go back to normal somehow. But she remained paralyzed in her apartment for hours on end, and it was often nearly nightfall before she would take a step towards the kitchen to heat a packet of frozen vegetables in the bowl that she left on the counter. She refused to eat anything else, afraid the sodium, trans fats, and cholesterol would burst her vessels, too.

~

She shut her door against the noise radiating from her neighbor's apartment. She could hear Luke's deafening laughter intermingled with voices like birds across the hall. She decided the next thing to do was make dinner.

It surprised her when she opened the freezer to find only one packet of vegetables. She normally kept it stuffed full with endless varieties—green beans, broccoli, asparagus, carrots—but in her preoccupation waiting for Luke, she had forgotten to go to the store. She brought down the lonely package and listened to the broccoli thud bitterly against the terra cotta bowl. After she heated the vegetables in the microwave, she stood next to the sink, chewing the bland pieces she forced in her mouth. She would have to go to the store.

When she used to go shopping with Sarah, her kitchen would be overflowing with food.

She would trail behind Sarah like a child chasing after a butterfly and watch as Sarah tossed item after item into their cart. Afterwards, Amelia would lug bags of fresh produce and meats into her apartment, thinking up menus for when Sarah visited for their weekly dinners. Later, when they stopped speaking and Amelia had to go shopping alone, she stuck to stockpiling frozen vegetables, reducing her need to go to the store. It was easier that way.

~

Armed with her bags, she struggled to climb the stairs to her apartment. She bought more than usual, and the frigid produce fell out of their sacks, dropping onto the stairs. She went still when she heard the door to her neighbor's apartment open, and Luke stepped out.

He was wearing the same shiny clothes as yesterday, his hair sticking up in the back. He slammed the door carelessly behind him, and the vibrations reached her feet. She remained still, trying to decide what to do, but when he looked up and down the hallway, he spotted her on the steps.

He smoothed his hair and straightened his clothes. "Need some help?" he asked.

She leaned over to pick up the pack of green beans that had fallen to the stairs. She heard his footsteps come closer, felt the weight lift off her shoulders. She glared at his boots reflecting the dull overhead light and mumbled a thank you.

She let him into her apartment and trailed behind him, watching his footsteps on her floorboards. She pictured her little families desperately running towards the crevices in the bottoms of his boots in a frantic hurry to avoid the giant footfalls. It must have felt like an earthquake down there.

He set the bags on the counter and observed as she put the food away.

"Did the neighbors have a TV?" Amelia asked.

"This all you eat?"

"I like it," she said.

"It's not enough—look at you."

"I like it."

"Let me take you out sometime, feed you some real food."

"This is real food."

"Come on."

He stepped closer, and she could smell his unwashed skin, the lingering scent of sex on his mouth. She stepped away.

"I need time to think about it," she said.

He scribbled his number on a piece of paper he tore from his back pocket and left the note on the counter. Amelia flinched at the slam of her door and then stood frozen, overwhelmed with stillness, staring at the paper. She thought of her sister. Sarah had been the type to follow her whims, good and bad. When she met a man she liked, and even a man she didn't, she would ask him out, and after her dates, she would rank him on a list in her phone, using checks or x's to keep the ones she liked separate from the ones she didn't. Amelia liked that Sarah had been daring. It amazed her, Sarah's ability to live, to do what she pleased. She had climbed things and flown in planes and flung herself off cliffs and visited countries Amelia couldn't pronounce. She

had never confided in Sarah about men, but she imagined how the conversation might play out between them.

I'm not interested, Amelia would say, brushing the note aside.

You don't even know him, Sarah would say.

Look at him. He's disgusting.

You're being judgmental, Sarah would say and offer out the paper. Just call him.

Would that make it better, Amelia would ask. Would that fix what I did wrong?

~

A week later, she agreed to let Luke take her to the movies. Amelia tugged at the ends of her dress, willing it to be longer, as he talked about popcorn buckets he used to buy for his ex-wife. They were recently divorced, he told her, and he was trying to move on.

They watched *Wonder Woman,* sitting side by side. In the dimness, she squinted at him out of the corner of her eye. She grimaced at his hand full of popcorn, suspended halfway to his mouth, the butter rolling off the sides and dripping on his pants as he stared, transfixed, at Gal Gadot in her short, Amazonian skirt. Amelia thought about marking an 'x' in her phone next to his name. He offered her the bucket, and she imagined the sodium and trans fats building in her veins, clogging into little dams until her vessels burst apart, leaking blood into her body, her brain. She said no.

After the movie, he took her to dinner at Texas Roadhouse. Luke wiped at the grease stains on his pants as they waited for their table. He tried asking over and over about her life. He listened intently each time she shrugged him off, saying there was nothing to tell, she wasn't that

interesting, there were better things to talk about.

They looked over their options, sitting across from each other. She stole glances of him over the top of her menu, and she noticed, for the first time, the softness to his face, the stubble on his chin, the little nicks where he cut himself shaving. She sat still, resisting the whim to reach out and touch him. He asked if she wanted a drink. When she refused, he asked if she knew what she wanted.

"I can't decide," she said. "I don't know what would be best."

When the waiter came to the table, Luke ordered two rare steaks with baked potatoes, butter and sour cream. Before Amelia could protest, the waiter was gone.

She looked at the peanut shells scattered around the floor, trying to decide if she should leave.

"Red meat can kill you."

She thought about her sister, about what Sarah would say, if she were sitting next to Amelia now. She knew Sarah would say yes to whatever she wanted, regardless of the consequences. She thought about how she envied Sarah and her ability to live so carefree in the world, how she wished she had inherited a little of that from their mother, how maybe that was the reason she pushed Sarah away from her, keeping all of what rightfully belonged to both of them. She had a small awareness that maybe tonight she could make it right. She could say yes. She could eat the food that would make her sick. She could be with Luke. She could do everything that Sarah would do if she were still alive.

But when the steak arrived at their table and she cut into it, the blood ran onto her plate

and around the greasy potato. She watched the little red river flowing on the white porcelain, mixing with the oil and butter, making little yellow bubbles on the surface, and she was overwhelmed with stillness. She couldn't make it right after all. She refused to eat the pulpy meat, her stomach clenching as she stared at the violence on her plate, and she knew she had failed Sarah again.

She looked up from the blood when he asked again if she wanted a drink. She kept all their mother's money, she pushed Sarah away, she refused to eat the food, but a drink, or two, or three, that much she could do. She said yes.

After dinner, she let him in to her apartment. They pawed at each other's clothes as they stumbled towards her bedroom, their tongues and limbs intertwined. He asked her if she wanted him to go, and even though her head felt detached from her body, she didn't hesitate.

"Stay," she said.

They moved to her bed, lying side by side. In the dark, she whispered his name as they reached for each other's bodies. She groaned under his weight as they rocked back and forth against each other, and when he rolled off of her and wrapped her in his arms, Amelia pictured their life together in confusing, bubbly images. She saw him moving into her apartment, she saw them buying a house, she saw their daughter that she made him name Sarah. She fell asleep, her head on his shoulder, breathing in the wine on his breath.

~

She woke in the morning to the slam of a door that was so loud, she was sure it would break off its hinges. She rolled over to see if Luke was awake, but instead found a scrap of paper, carelessly torn at the edges. She wanted to read the note, but she couldn't find the will to pick it

up. Seconds passed, minutes, an hour. Sunlight glared through her window, casting an obtrusive light across Luke's scrawl, and she was about to pick it up. Her head started to ache, and she was about to pick it up.

Bad Mothers

I saw her first in Whole Foods, standing quiet and unmoving in front of the fruit. I was on my way home that morning when she appeared in front of me like an apparition: tall and waif-like, directly in my path, stiller than I thought any living being could be. She was so still I was worried she was dead, had died hours ago, her body settled into rigor mortis, but before I could call for help, she whipped her hand up and waved her little fingers at the pears. I swear I could hear her bones creaking.

The rising scream of the child behind me begging for more juice seemed not to deter her.

The woman just wiggled her fingers at the pears so intently all I could do was stare, facing her head on, transfixed on what she could be doing. She was as strange to me as if she was a foreign land.

My phone beeped in my pocket, alerting me to a text I knew was from Lauren. I ignored the notification. She was waiting on me to bring home the organic bananas and sweet potatoes, as well as the glass bottles she needed for our baby. It was difficult, buying all our food from Whole Foods. I didn't make much as an insurance processor, but Lauren insisted she eat only organic food while the baby was fed with her milk, organic food specifically from Whole Foods, and I gave in. I didn't like to argue with her. I visited the store every Friday, leaving work and taking the bus that went right past my childhood apartment. I sat and watched, waiting to see the dilapidated building with the rusty, white fire escape I used to sit on to be free of my mother, a woman whose caressing hands turned to closed fists when her breath smelled bitter.

People in the store walked around us and picked out their produce, despite the woman in their way. She did not seem to strike anyone else as odd, or if she did, they didn't show it, instead moving around her as if she were a commonplace fixture. She spread out her fingers and

closed the short distance of air in between her and the pears, smiling as she did so, to rest her entire hand on three at once. She closed her eyes and kept pressing her hand slowly through the fruit, deeper into the depths of the darkness of the surrounding pears, with their heavily shaped bottoms, until her entire forearm was submerged. In my experience, people did not, on an ordinary day, come to the grocery store to thrust their arm into a fruit bin. I did not speak at first, but instead listened to the sounds of the people around us, the talking and clinking of jewelry against carts and rustling of lists, which made her silence and my silence all the more apparent.

My phone beeped again.

"What are you doing?" I asked, perhaps a little too quietly because she didn't move. She didn't even open her eyes or turn her head, her arm stuck down in those pears.

"What are you doing?" I asked again, louder, but she still didn't move. Maybe she couldn't hear me. Maybe we didn't exist in the same world but instead lived in different dimensions, mine being the one that was real since she looked as if she could disappear at any minute.

I decided, at the sight of her arm-deep in fruit, that I would follow her home, hoping she would lead me to the portal of her world, where she could finally hear me, where she could tell me who she was, what she was doing. I figured I could sneak my way behind her, while she walked or took the bus, and I thought I could go unnoticed, maybe crawl through her door, right at her heels, wherever she lived, before she even realized I was there.

I thought I saw her flinch when my phone started ringing, but that was probably wishful thinking. I wanted to startle her. I wanted to see her move because of something I had done. I wanted her to look in my direction. But she remained undisturbed as I lifted the phone to my ear.

"Mary, come home," my wife said before I had uttered a word. "She's your baby, too."

I hung up and continued to stare at the woman in front of me. I didn't want to leave her here alone. What if no one else was as quiet and understanding as I was? What if someone else came along, desperately seeking pears, impatient and angry, and pushed her out of the way? Would it break the spell she was casting on the fruit, the healing touch she might have to make them everlasting?

My phone beeped again, and I knew I was out of time. If I waited any longer, I would be walking into an argument when I got home, one of questioning whereabouts, of accusations of parental duty neglect. When I left, she was still standing with her arm shoved down in the bin, a small smile on her face.

On the bus to my house, I tried to remain as still as the woman in the grocery store, tried to make someone wonder what I was doing. Could I have that same effect? Could somebody stand to stare at me for as long as I remained? I tried to sneak glances around me without moving my head, but no one seemed to notice. No one was looking at me. No one usually did. Except for Lauren.

I fell in love with Lauren slowly. I fell in love with the bits and pieces of her I devoured when she wasn't looking, the way she cradled a cat like a baby with its back running up her forearm, its head resting in the crook of her elbow, the way she swished the water around in her mouth before swallowing, making sure the liquid touched every corner, the way she touched her thumb to each of her fingertips when she was angry, as if counting her fingers over and over. But mostly I fell in love with the way she smelled, with the darkness that lay within it. I imagined her smell to be like opening a wooden box I found in my attic while standing in the pouring rain at night, the full moon reflecting off every inch of my skin. I would close my eyes and breathe in that scent, pretending I was opening her instead. I had never smelled anything like it before, and

I never smelled anything that could compare. Until she had Serena.

I had never wanted a kid. After we got married and Lauren first started suggesting, I told her over and over I didn't want one, I wasn't the mothering kind, but after the seven years of her begging, I gave up and stopped saying no. I didn't want to stand in the way of anything she desired, even if that meant a tiny, sticky, screaming ball of flesh. We went to the sperm bank to find out how much it would cost for artificial insemination, and ten months and twelve days later, Serena came. It cost us a total of $3,425.89, even with Lauren succeeding the first time she tried. She quit her job to focus on the baby, and we put the bill on my credit card. I was working extra hours to pay it off. I wasn't with her when they injected the sperm into her cervix or when she gave birth—I didn't want to stand in her way, but I also wanted no part in the process—but when I came to the hospital after she delivered, she let me pick up the baby and hold it in my arms the same way she cradled cats. I closed my eyes and breathed the baby in, and I knew she had come from Lauren. She carried with her that dark, wooden scent, but there was something else that lingered within her. The wood and the darkness and the rain intermingled with the smell of the earth soaking in the first drops of a thunderstorm, like a rainforest at midnight. I almost started to love her, standing there in the middle of the hospital room, eyes closed and breathing her in, but when she searched for her first taste of nourishment and instead found the wrong pair of breasts holding nothing inside, she screamed and cried and I almost dropped her, startled as I was. I handed her back to Lauren and suggested we name her Serena, for the amount of patience and serenity I was going to need for the coming years. I did not tell Lauren my reasoning. But she loved the sound of the name, the way it moved from one syllable to the next, a rustling whisper of euphony in her mouth.

~

I could hear Serena screaming from outside when I came home from the store. As soon as I opened the door, Lauren asked if I brought home the bottles, which I had forgotten at the sight of the woman in the pears. Serena had stopped accepting breast milk after I had held her the third time. She would search with her tiny, suckling mouth for the food she thought I should carry, and when she could find none within me, she became frustrated and confused in my arms. I would hand her back to Lauren, hopeless, feeling as if I had betrayed her, but even in Lauren's arms, with the right pair of breasts, she refused to drink. She didn't know which chest she could trust to feed her, so the doctors told us to try bottles filled with Lauren's milk. Lauren stocked bottle after bottle, like a human cafeteria, pumping every two hours and storing her liquid in the refrigerator. I tried some once, after begging Serena to go back to sleep in the middle of the night. I'd heard breast milk tastes sweet, like vanilla ice cream, but Lauren's milk looked and tasted like it had been strained through the pores of a hard maple tree. After the first time, every few weeks, I would sneak a bottle and drink it in the night, shoving the glass in the bottom of the trash bin to hide the evidence, afraid if Lauren found the freshly washed bottles in the cupboard, she would discover my secret. I imagined myself as Serena, small and hungry for Lauren, thinking that maybe in this way, I would understand her a little better and eventually come to love her as my own.

~

I closed the door and watched the pair in the kitchen, Serena screaming from her high chair, her six-month-old lungs more powerful than mine could ever be, Lauren sipping coffee in her right hand and pushing eggs around in a skillet with her left. From where I stood in the doorway, I could smell the eggs, pungent and strong. I've asked her not to cook with curry spices—the scent masks her wooden aroma for days—and yet there she was, using them anyway.

"Did you bring the bottles?" Lauren asked again.

I didn't want to tell her about the woman I saw, the woman who transfixed me, hypnotized me, made me forget about everything, including my family. I wanted to keep her to myself, my little secret. She appeared before me, stopped my life for those brief, wonderful moments, and that was mine. Lauren couldn't have that, too. Besides, she would never understand. Everything we did, we did for Serena.

"They were out." I looked at the baby, with her gaping mouth in a deep, black, accusatory "O." It was easy to lie to Lauren, it was not so easy to lie to Serena. I thought she could see right through me, right down to the core of who I was, the wrong kind of mother, the selfish kind, the kind who couldn't be in love with her only daughter, try as she might. She lifted up her hands and screamed, filled with that overwhelming desire to be held and loved. I wanted to pick her up and breathe her in, but I would never be able to smell her over the cumin and turmeric wafting from the pan. Besides, it wasn't me she wanted.

"Bring them home after work. They keep disappearing," Lauren said.

"A mystery."

~

I saw her next at a bus stop. Two weeks had passed, and I was on my way to work. I had almost given up on seeing her again, but there she was, standing next to the bench. My bus wasn't routed for her stand, so I hurried off the next stop and ran the two blocks back, hoping she would still be there. I passed a couple along the way, huddled together over a stroller, doting on whatever lay within. I wanted to stop and see, peek in and discover what wonders were there, but I knew, most likely, it was just a baby.

I didn't understand the obsession, that overwhelming love parents feel for their kids that

makes them tolerate the screaming, the neediness, the ungratefulness. I did not have that kind of patience. Lauren used to tell me I would understand once we had a baby of our own. It's different when they're yours, she would say, and I assumed that love and patience would fall down from the sky and burst over me, magically transforming me into the right kind of mother, a better one than mine had been. But that never happened. Even when Serena was growing inside of Lauren and we could see her pressing her little feet against Lauren's stomach, what I felt, I wouldn't describe as love. Lauren would laugh and place my hand over her stomach to feel Serena kicking, but instead of adoration, I felt fear. Fear of Lauren's pain, fear that Serena would kick her way through her womb and fall out dead, fear of being the kind of mother that would grow Serena into a bad person, the kind of mother mine was—a callous mother, a selfish mother, a bad mother. I still didn't love Serena, not even when I closed my eyes and breathed her in. What I felt instead was resentment. I was resentful of the time Serena consumed, the extra hours I had to work to pay for her existence, the slow degradation of my marriage I could feel day by day by day. I didn't know if I could ever love her. I didn't know how.

~

The woman was still waiting when I reached the stop, standing next to the bench in that silent, statuesque manner of hers, frail arms loaded with grocery bags. I wanted to peek inside to see if she was carrying the pears she worshipped weeks ago. I stood next to her and pretended to check my watch. Did she know I was there?

She stared straight ahead, and I wondered if she would be able to hear me if I spoke. I wanted to know who she was. I wanted nothing else but to twirl her name around my tongue and see how it tasted in my mouth. Her name would taste sweet, I thought, or bitter like the frozen kale peeking out from her bag. I stepped a little closer—I figured I could push boundaries of

personal space with her—and she remained standing, staring. What was she looking for, I wondered, when she stared so intently? Was there something I couldn't see? I followed her gaze and looked across the road, but all I could see were the gray buildings lined down the street I knew so well from my childhood.

"I used to live there as a kid," I blurted, perhaps a little too loudly. I didn't know why I brought it up, why I thought she would care. But at least I made her move. She flinched, startled, and turned her face to look at me. She took a step back, her chapped lips turned down in confusion, little pieces of skin flaking at the edges of the broken craters forming on her mouth. I hoped she had tubes of Chapstick in her bags. "Where you're looking. I was born there. Mine was the one with the white fire escape." I pointed down the street.

She nodded and turned her head. Was she imagining me as a child, climbing down that metal staircase, my mother calling after me? Was she picturing me kicking a ball with the downstairs neighbor?

She said nothing, only continued to stare down the street of my youth.

"I was hit by a car on that corner," I said, pulling from the worst of my stories. I needed her to talk to me. I needed to hear her voice. "My mother was upstairs asleep. All that commotion—people yelling, sirens going off—but she never looked outside. The nurses said it took her an hour to even pick up the phone."

She raised her eyebrows at me but said nothing.

"She wasn't a very good mother," I said.

She looked like she was going to say something, her chapped lips parted, her breath drawn in. I was finally going to hear her voice, hear an anecdote from her childhood that made her into the mesmerizing woman that stood before me.

"My mother's dead."

Like her body, her voice was small and frail and broken and if she had spoken at the wrong moment, its dissonance would have been lost to me forever, pushed away by the bus approaching the stand, the brakes squealing to a stop. She readied herself to climb the stairs, a mountain compared to her waif-like frame. I had to ask her. I couldn't let her get away without knowing.

"I saw you in Whole Foods," I said. "In the pears."

She looked at me as if I was something to be feared, as if I was the strange one, as if I was the one who stood motionless for hours with my arm crushed by fruit.

"This is my bus." She walked away from me, lugging her bags of groceries. She made them look heavy. So impossibly heavy that I could feel the weight from where I stood, and I didn't think I could move. But I didn't want her to leave, not when I couldn't follow her, not when she just started talking.

"What were you doing?" I called after her. She turned her head around, her thin eyebrows knitted in a V. "What were you doing?"

I saw her mouth move, but her voice was blown away by the yelling and honking of people on a Pints and Pedals bike tour. She climbed into the bus, and she was gone.

~

I didn't go to work that day. Instead, I went home. When I walked through the door, Lauren looked at me in surprise. Serena was nowhere to be seen.

"Why aren't you at work?" she asked.

"I didn't feel like going." Cumin and turmeric assaulted my nostrils in that sweet, pungent aroma.

"Did you get fired?"

"I've asked you not to use those spices. I can't stand the smell," I said.

"I like them," she said. "I like the way they taste."

"Where's Serena?" I wanted to see her, I wanted to pick her up and hold her to my chest to see if I could love her, to see if her heart could send waves of connection to mine.

"I just put her down."

I walked down the hall to her room, my face reflecting in all the pictures of Serena that hung on the wall. I stood in the doorway and watched, her tiny fists crashing down to her mattress, fighting off the demons in her sleep. I wondered if I picked her up if she would fight me.

"Don't wake her," Lauren whispered. "It took me so long to get her to sleep."

I went to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of Lauren's milk. Lauren protested and said that Serena didn't need it, she wasn't supposed to be fed for another hour.

"I want to feed her," I said, which was not exactly true. What I wanted was to get away so that I could drink it myself, to fill my mouth with the taste of Lauren that I longed for, that I needed, to pretend I was nestled in the comfort of that hard maple tree and feel her syrup sliding down my throat.

"No," she said.

I set the bottle back into the refrigerator and crossed my arms.

I stared at Lauren for a long time, standing in that kitchen that smelled like curry. I wanted to cry and scream, I wanted to yell at her. I wanted to act like a child, like Serena. Maybe then she would hold me in her arms the way she did cats, the way she did babies. Maybe then she would kiss my face, my eyes, my lips, and I would feel her love again. It had been a long time

since we held each other in the dark. It had been a long time since we whispered each other's names into the black of our room, our hands working over each other's skin. Did she still love me, I wondered? Or did Serena take up all of the space in her heart, wedging me closer and closer to the edges that I fell out without even noticing?

~

I saw her last walking down the street in front of me. I was making my way to the bus stop from work, and I didn't recognize her at first. It seemed so unnatural that she should be walking, moving. I was caught off guard by the swing of her hair, swept up into a ponytail, the ends fraying and frizzy, but I eventually realized it was her. Those small, careful steps could not belong to anyone else. I didn't say anything, just followed her slow little movements. I didn't want to draw her attention, afraid I would frighten her away. I followed her down the street, past the bus stop where I heard her voice, past the Whole Foods where I saw her in the pears, past the stop that would take me home. She didn't turn her head or look at anyone else. She just kept walking. And I kept following, trailing behind her where traces of her scent lingered, a stale, melancholy aroma, full of sadness and longing. Her scent made me think of the night I came home from the hospital after being hit by that car, when my mother left me, broken and in pain, and went down to the liquor store to buy the bottles of the sweet vanilla vodka she liked so much. She came home late, that stark alcoholic scent on her breath, like a can of icing left out on the counter too long, and laid down next to me on my bed and cried into my shoulder. This woman, whoever she was, wherever she came from, she smelled like that.

I continued to follow her until she stopped and crossed the street, retreating into an apartment building laced with a red fire escape. For all the obsessing that I had done with this woman, I expected her to live somewhere strange, somewhere magical, somewhere unknown.

The ordinariness of her life was disheartening. I did not try to go in. I no longer wanted to.

Instead, I went back to Whole Foods and walked straight to the fruit. I thrust my arm down deep into the bin and felt the pears pressing against my skin, the sweet, earthy scent filling my lungs. I closed my eyes and imagined picking one off a tree, feeling the full weight of it in my hand, the size of a premature baby. I brought my hand out, clutching a pear, green and soft. I walked straight out of the store without paying, hiding the pear with my hands against my stomach. When I got home, I didn't speak, just stood over the wooden cutting board, slicing my prize into small squares. The juice ran out over my fingers onto the board, filling in the spaces where Lauren had hacked into it time and time again. I picked up a square and shoved it in my mouth, and it was so soft, I could squish it with my tongue. I twirled the mush around between my teeth, the sweetness sliding down my throat. I picked up another square and turned toward Serena, her eyes wide and expectant, her little mouth sucking on a bottle of Lauren's milk. I walked to her, offering out the small square of fruit.

"Don't give her that," Lauren said, eyes wide in horror. What did she think would happen, if Serena took that pear in her mouth? I wanted Serena to taste what I was tasting, to share in a moment together that Lauren wasn't a part of. "I don't want her eating solid food yet."

Serena reached out with her sticky little hands and smiled.

And I fed it to her anyway.

We Are Burning

1

We love our mountains. We love the way they dip and roll, the way they turn from green to orange and red. We bought our land and built our treehouses and when we let our visitors in, they talked about the smell. That bright, wooden, inescapable smell. They stood motionless at our windows and looked out at our mountains, and we didn't say anything because we already knew. We knew what they were thinking. We saw it every day. We looked out at the stretch of peaks and elevations, at the vastness of the world around us that made us realize how truly small our lives and our troubles, that wrapped us in an ever comforting envelope of peace, and we got lost in our solitude, our gorgeous aloneness, just like them, the tourists who visit for days, weeks, and months to get some time alone.

2

We watched the bears play in our yards, tumbling over our trash cans and opening our car doors. Some of us, like Madison, watched the bears swim in our pools, picking up their cubs and throwing them in the air so they could fall back into the water with a splash. Madison, fresh from her divorce after twenty-four years of marriage, liked to sip tea in her sunroom with her dog resting at her feet, watching the mama and baby bears, thinking about how she wished she had a child of her own. And others, like Justin, watched bears paw their way into cars, searching for food, sometimes sitting upright in the driver's seat. Justin would let his daughter peek out at the bear from the doorway, one hand on her arm and the other on the front door, ready to rip her back inside the house if necessary. We took videos and pictures, posting them on Facebook and Instagram so our friends and family who didn't live with us in Gatlinburg could see the beauty

that surrounds us. They could see what it was like to grow up and learn from the wild.

3

But despite all this, despite the beauty they saw from our windows, the photos and videos they liked and commented on (How amazing, they said. Look at God's great work, they said. How I wish I could live there, they said.), despite the trips they made, driving from miles and miles away to stand on the balconies of our rental cabins, they left us alone. Alone to pick up the pieces. Alone to dust the ash off what remained. Some of us had friends and family to turn to, some of us didn't. Madison called her ex-husband every night for a year, placing her phone on speaker so she could pretend he was sleeping next to her. Some of us lost parts of ourselves we would never recover, and some of us didn't. Justin took to drinking six shots of whiskey and two beers every night just to sleep, his daughter back with her mother in Washington State. But all of us felt utterly and completely alone.

4

A fearful word, alone.

5

We stood alone in lines at the travel section in Walmart, covered in our ashy clothes. We looked at each other but did not speak. We didn't have to. We felt the collective aching inside our bodies. The deep, visceral sadness that connected all of us like branches intertwined under the ground, but like those trees, we each stood upright on our own. The volunteers came in droves for a week with the news cameras, donating aid, volunteering their time. But when the cameras

left and the aid ran out, so did most of them. Some of us used to wonder what happened when the cameras turned off, but now we know. We are left to fend for ourselves, alone.

6

The day the fires came, we were not evacuated, as we should have been. We sat and watched our TVs, listened to our radios, waiting for an announcement that would never come. We thought we were safe. Instead, we heard about the fires through friends, family, neighbors. We answered our phones, one by one. (Get out of your house, our family and friends said. Your mountains are on fire.) We didn't know the wind had kicked up and sent fireballs through the sky from the blaze started days ago but not put out, spreading from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to mountain top and mountain top all over our town, jumping, catching, and burning everything in its path like a great, raging inferno. Madison had a bag ready to go, packed that morning just in case she needed to leave, the heavy smoke in the air the only indication of what was to come. Her neighbors, a husband and wife, had left an hour earlier because their baby was having trouble breathing. Some of us grabbed what we could on our way out—clothes, pets, heirlooms—and some of us made it out only with the clothes we wore. Justin, alone for the weekend with his daughter at her friend's house in Knoxville, didn't notice until the fire was right up on him, when he looked out the window between bites of ramen noodles and saw his deck in flames. His neighbor, a young woman living alone above her grandparent's garage, was sleeping as the building burned beneath her, the nonstop calls from her friend the only reason she woke. But some us didn't make it out at all.

7

We saw each other on our way down our mountains, and we did what we could to help. The smoke, heavy around us, made it hard to drive, hard to breathe, hard to see, and we didn't know how those who were not familiar with our winding, snaking roads could find their way. We tried to pick up people we saw running or stuck, watching as the walls of fire closed in all around us. But most of us were in this alone, sitting in the lines of cars, following the directions of the firefighters, pointing us to the roads left open. Justin stopped and begged for help, thinking if they got there in time, they could save his house, but the firefighters told him they weren't here to fight, just to get us out. Like a scene from a horror movie, Madison watched as some of us ran alongside the bears and deer through the backed-up traffic: A young woman abandoned her car and belongings in a side parking lot, too frightened to wait; an older couple stopped every few feet to try and catch their breath but instead inhaled smoke into their lungs; two young brothers who were stuck without a car, their parents gone into town for groceries. We could all feel the heat encroaching on us, surrounded by the flames, and we thought we were going to die, afraid and alone.

8

And some of us did.

9

But for those of us who made it out, we split in different directions. Some of us huddled around in the Rocky Top Sports Complex that served as our evacuation shelter for weeks. Justin sat on

his cot, his donated clothes folded in a bag on the floor, and watched the family across from him. He recognized their daughter from picking up his little girl from school. Some of us slept in our cars in any parking lot we could find, and some of us drove to a friend's or family's house, waiting and listening to know how bad the damage was, if we had a home to go back to. A handful of us called our loved ones out of town and turned our cars in their direction. Madison took her dog and drove overnight all the way to Chicago to stay with her sister for a while. Our families and friends patted our backs with deep sympathy and tried to understand, but our grief was our own.

10

Four days after the fires, we were allowed back up into our mountains to look at our houses, to see if we had anything left. We waited in lines of cars once again, a different kind of panic in our hearts. The firefighters and police officers took our names in case we never made it back down. We drove up our roads, staring at the blackness of the ground and the trees, once so green and full of life. We passed house after house reduced to ash and nothing. We tried to recall what they looked like before, but all we could see was the devastation in front of us. Sometimes, we saw a house standing alone in between two black and gray spots of rubble, which seemed to us impossible, miraculous, that the owner could stumble upon such luck, and we hoped, deep in our hearts, that we had been blessed the same. Some of us were. But most of us weren't. And those of us who weren't, pulled in the driveways of the houses we used to own and stared out into the nothingness that remained, a giant hole where our homes, our lives, our hearts had been. We searched through the ash for anything that survived, and sometimes a few of us came across something. Madison found an old Christmas ornament and some jewelry melted together. Justin

found a broken drinking glass and the bones of his daughter's cat. But most of us came across nothing. We stood alone in the middle of our houses—the bedroom the only sure spot we could see because of the metal springs of the bed—and looked out over our mountains. We could see the stark difference where the fire had been, the green and orange and red interrupted by blaring patches of black. We traced it with our eyes, that strange, winding path that led to our front doors.

11

Some of us lived with our families out of our cars for days, weeks, months at a time, some of us couch surfed with friends of people we had only just met, and some of us had nowhere to live at all. Our friends and family called and texted, messaged us on Facebook and Instagram, asking if we were okay. And we weren't.

12

Visitors came to our animal shelters, looking for pets to rescue. They cleared out our dogs saved off the mountains in a couple of weeks, "fire dogs" they called them. Danielle walked into one of our shelters and asked if we had any left. We didn't, only pets saved under "regular" circumstances. She turned around and left, not bothering to look.

13

The numbers grew higher and higher. Over 17,000 acres of our beloved mountains burned, over 2,000 of our buildings destroyed, almost 200 of us injured, and 14 of us dead.

14

We learned that patience and understanding had a time limit. The doctoral student who lost all of her research and wanted to talk to her sister about the fires, but her sister felt they had talked it through too much (Isn't it about time you move on, she said). Madison's friends stopped calling because they didn't know what else to say. Justin knew of a young woman who visited Helen Ross McNabb six months after the fires for the free therapy consultations they were doling out in the aftermath, but as she sat alone and waited, she listened to the staff argue back and forth on whether they "were still taking them," as if her courage to seek help was only congratulatory if she made it in the doors within two months, three months, four, as if she was an other, as if the fires that had already taken all of her material possessions, her house and car and clothes and makeup, had also tainted her down to the very core of her soul, made her rotten and disgusting like the corpse of the rabbit her old dog had once bitten and chewed and broken.

15

One year later, some of us sat side by side at a memorial ceremony praying for the loved ones of the deceased, listening to the plans of a memorial walking bridge, as if that would ever be enough. Madison still lived with her sister in Chicago, unable to afford to rebuild another house in the mountains. Justin bought a small camper trailer with the $10,000 he received from the Dolly Parton Fund and set it in his driveway. He hadn't heard from his daughter, still living with her mother, since he told her he couldn't save her pet, since she hung up in a torrent of rage and tears after blaming him for her cat, for the fires, for everything. We held each other's hands and felt our collective grief. We bowed our heads in a moment of silence for those we lost. But we knew that, even though we all shared in this experience, each of us lost things that only belonged

to one, our memories and connections with an object solely our own. (My house, we said. My pictures, we said. My family heirlooms, we said.) And because of this, isn't it something, that even when we're completely surrounded by people, we can still feel entirely alone?

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