

WE MARCH TO THE SEA

BY

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Joy

In the spring of 1865, General William Tecumseh Sherman marched his army through the Sandhills on his way up from burning Atlanta. His troops, hungry and tired, raided houses and farmsteads looking for food. They stole. They ripped women from houses and pawed at dresses while the women's husbands rotted in northern prisons. They shot and were shot at. We never had the need for mass graves where I come from, but our land felt the blood that Gettysburg drank just the same. When you say the name, "Sherman" in my family, you better expect to know that's a four-letter word.

Sherman marched through Laurel Hill, coming up along the PeeDee River in the swamp country. Once, wondering how his men fared amongst the alligators and the water moccasins, I spent a month researching the fate of northern troops in swampland for one of my history classes. I did another paper on his progress through the Carolinas, explaining how he fanned over us like a rake whose handle started in D.C, with each prong leaving behind a gash of burnt houses and dirty faced women. I'm working now on a project examining the recorded histories of the freed slaves that followed Sherman's troops as he pillaged the South. I read their letters and interviews in the school's library after most of the students have gone home or simply quit studying. In the dark-lit corners of the building, I press my ears against the papers, as if I might catch a hint at the cadence of their voices if I can only find a room that's quiet enough.

When I first came to the college three years ago, my cousin Clint and I moved my things—left over family furniture that softly smelled of basements and attics—into a house split to make four apartments. The house had been originally built in the 1850s and, my landlord informed me, had been burned to its foundations by Sherman's troops. I imagine, in the nights, when my bare feet slap across the original hardwood floors, how those creaks were also heard by a man who fought against that force, by a

woman who feared those blue woolled uniforms. In the days, I lean on window sills that felt the weight of those who had seen the buildings burn. The maple in the front yard, the landlord tells me, was planted by a Confederate soldier freed from northern custody in 1866.

My parents came once, on that first week I moved into the house apartment. It was August. We could barely hear one another over the whirrs of the fans in my windows. My mother thumped the walls to hear their thickness and pulled her lips together when she found them thin.

“You will freeze in the winters,” she said. “You will be sick. I worry.”

My dad examined the furniture. He identified a couch my Uncle Yossar used to have in his house. He pointed to a wooden table that was his, he claimed, when he was just beginning to date my mother. There were dish towels in the kitchen that reminded him of the flour sacks my grandmother used to cover pies with. He stood next to me, my eyes level with his collarbone, and clapped his palm on my shoulder.

“1866?” he asked. “Wellup, what else is history but living it?”

But after that first day, after they said goodbye and pulled the door shut—this took them sometime because the door swells in its frame in the summers—I was alone. I began to cut open boxes and pile things into cabinets. I had no major, no course of study. I was enrolled in odds and ends, classes with names like Cultural Studies of the Amazons, Remedial Chemistry, and Post Modern Poets. At the request of my Uncle Vance, who also found himself still locating Sherman in the landscape, I was also enrolled in American History of the Civil War.

I remember the moment—pulling open a draw in the kitchen to put away the silverware, finding a small notebook, flipping through pages of grocery lists, phone numbers, questions. And then on the last page: “History teaches everything including the future,” and in small cursive letters beneath: *Lamartine*. That was the spark—I knew it then just as I know it now. It was as if I had been asking a question about my life all along and never heard myself asking until that little notebook came up with the answer. I thought to myself then, alone in that dusty hot apartment with nothing but second hand furniture and a bunch of fuzzy ideas that might turn out to be dreams in my head—I thought, if I ever want to know

where I'm going in life, I had better start with where I came from. I wanted to study History, from start to finish. If ever a human breathed a word and someone else marked that breathing down, I wanted to know it. I wanted to have a timeline, a record of numbers in my head, at my disposal. Eventually, I focused it to where I am now—the Civil War. Because if ever something was to change the path of my Jalin family history, it would be those battling moments in our back yard.

My first year at the college, I couldn't think of anything else except war, conflict, this versus that. I would think *history* and picture one side of something against the other side of that something. It was as though everywhere I looked, that word floated in front of my eyes: *versus*. I found its definition and printed it out in big letters so that I could read it from where I had taped it at the foot of my bed: "as compared to or as one of two choices; in contrast with." It's still taped there now, with fresh tape because the edges curl up when the walls get hot in the summers.

That first year was like being tossed into an eddy while everybody stood around waiting for you to drown—having never been to college himself, my dad believed there was nothing you could learn there that you couldn't learn from sticking your own hands in the dirt. He made educational claims to "apprenticeships" or "working student experience" and took jobs when he stumbled over them. I would walk to school, walk back, sit on the couch that belonged to Uncle Yossar, eat from a bowl that belonged to my Aunt Brigget, and watch to see if the phone that once belonged to Clint would vibrate, light up, jingle—shadows shifted, I finished readings, flipped on lamps, and would turn back one corner of my bed while the sheets stayed tight on the far side of it. Outside hummed unfamiliar traffic, other students wandering back from noisy bars, dogs. In the mornings before I walked once more to class, I would call my Uncle Vance—my financier, because I was studying what he always wanted to study but wasn't allowed to because my Aunt Brigget convinced him to study medicine instead. Our conversations would go like this:

Me: "I see conflict in Chemistry, the bases against the acids. In Sociology, someone has to be on top, someone on the bottom—the middle is the conflict between those rising and falling. I can't sleep because I see General MacArthur in a tank rolling over women and children."

Uncle Vance: “Life is conflict.”

Me: “I have trouble finding my way around campus because the buildings are so tall—my History teacher says, ‘Joy, you are late again and that’s a five point deduction.’ Can I argue? How do I explain the confusion I find in concrete sidewalks when they seem to amble and wander between brick and magnolias and the Spanish moss that covers the names of the buildings?”

Uncle Vance: “Life is conflict.”

Me: “I’m writing about Sherman—I can’t stop reading his journals.”

Uncle Vance: “Find this in them—‘War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it—“

Me: “He’s a bastard. His troops burned the pocasins until the peat got so hot it left lakes and ponds behind. He put water where it shouldn’t be.”

Uncle Vance: “‘There is no use trying to reform it’—“

Me: “Bastard.”

Meaning Sherman. Then I would hang up and hold the phone in my lap, imagining the pocasins burning so hot that the land would sink into the ground water. I used to think: why is it that my Uncle Vance and I cannot stop researching a man who was the very reason that my great-great-grandmother grew up without her two brothers? When I was a child, my dad had once refused to talk to me for a week because I had simply asked why we didn’t like this “Sherman” in our family—when he gave up and answered my question, he sneer words like ‘hatred’ and ‘fire’ and ‘ruin’ into my ears. But the second half of the quote haunted me. I wondered why there could be no use in trying to reform something so cruel and deadly as war. One night, I waited until Midnight—which was admittedly silly since I was acting under the assumption that if my dad were asleep, then perhaps he wouldn’t know that, a hundred miles away, I was doing an Internet search on General William Tecumseh Sherman. I remember my fingernails rattling on the keyboard, tapping the “l” too many times, spelling “Tecumseh” as “Tecusmah” and then as “Temucseh”. When I entered his name correctly, a photograph appeared: a man in profile, sharp black and greys, his eyes, sunken, looking off somewhere beyond the frame. I searched the page for the first part of the quote that my Uncle Vance would say to me: “War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform

it. . .” and I found: “. . .the crueller it is, the sooner it will be over.” I printed this quote and taped it next to the versus quote at the foot of my bed.

Three years since, and the collection of quotes on my wall is growing. I have added a framed portrait of the man—the same profile picture I first found on the website—in a wooden frame I found leaning against a wall in the art department. In my bedroom, he is facing Turkeyfoot, my home on the cotton and tobacco field PeeDee River banks, as if to say each night, “Remember, Joy. Remember what I’ve done.” I have a new quote I’m exploring for a senior History paper next year, one that I found while reading through his collection of letters in the library: “My aim was to whip the rebels, to humble their pride, to follow them to their inner most recesses, and make them fear and dread us. ‘Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,’” he says. As if he could teach us something we didn’t already know. And I could never say it out loud, but sometimes, I find myself thinking maybe he was right to whip us. Maybe we deserved the whipping. Tit for tat, my dad says, but never about Sherman.

I found another quote, too—one that haunts me more than Uncle Vance’s quote about war being cruelty. I’m so afraid of this quote that I dream sometimes that Sherman comes to me as a ghost, wakes me by shaking the bed. He leans over and his cheeks are wet and shining from the streetlight outside. He says, “I am sick and tired of fight—its glory is all moonshine.” Then he takes a hand and wipes his cheeks and his hands are shining, then, too. He continues: “even success the most brilliant is over dead and mangled bodies, with the anguish and lamentations of distant families, appealing to me for sons, husbands, fathers.” And I try to talk to him in this dream—I reach my hand to his wrist in consolation, his eyes so desolate and his ghost trembles as if from sorrow, guilt. I say, “But that was your success, over my kin’s dead and mangled bodies,” and I squeeze his wrist, I try to dig my nails into his ghost skin. He shakes his head, as if he isn’t here to listen to me, just to speak. “Tis only those who have never heard a shot, never heard the shriek and groans of the wounded and lacerated, that cry aloud for more blood, more vengeance, more desolation,” he says. Each time I dream up this ghost of Sherman, he pulls his wrist out of my hand and turns to walk through my front door. I am left with the clapping of his boots on the wooden stairs leading out to the street below.

Sometimes, in classes or on walks back to the apartment, I try to think of the faces of my family members—my cousins Jemson and June with puffed cheeks and freshwater eyes, Vance with whole canyons running down the sides of his face, my dad and mother, together so long they seem to share the same dipped nose. I think of my cousins on my mother’s side up in the mountains, how they live collected in a single town hours away down potholed, two-laned highways. I think of me, an offshoot, a college girl, as my mother says, the one that got out. I think of how still, three years’ since, no one calls me, and when I call home, my mother sounds hollow and mentions my grandparents’ sinking health as if she’s trying to keep it secret from them. And my dad, he takes the phone from her and talks only of his building projects and how he plans to turn our backyard into a tourist site for Civil War enthusiasts—he asks for my approval on this word, “enthusiasts,” asks if that’s the right way to put it. He explains how on the summer break, just a few days from now, he expects me to put my schooling to use. He claims to have an outfit for me and that I will run tours of our battle site this summer. He recites to me his version of the Battle of Turkeyfoot, tells me to memorize it, to say it into my pillow at night, to speak it to the trees on campus and into the stones that make the buildings.

Sometimes, my Uncle Vance sends me emails asking about college and homework and Sherman, and he will be encouraging and say not to worry about the money and if I need more for rent or food or books, I know how to reach him. And when he sends these, I call him instead of hitting reply and his voice sounds like a swamp for being so full of movement and living, and I tell about the research or the new quotes and he listens, discusses the implications of each. I read him portions of thesis statements or evidence chunks and occasionally, I do hit reply and email him whole paragraphs of my work for his review. But today is the only time one of them has come to see me.

Tonight, coming out of the library in the dark, I heard my name spoken familiar, and in turning to catch the sounds, there was Clint—still too tall for me to wrap my arms around his shoulders but there and talking and his teeth overlapping in the light of the streetlamp.

“I came to have dinner with my cousin,” he said, before I could ask. “Let’s get pizza.”

“Me?” I said. “Me?”

“Of course,” he said. “How’s things, anyway?”

And we sat together over a pizza at a little joint off campus, me answering how’s things here and he telling me how things are at Turkeyfoot. And I asked what sorts of girls he was seeing and he said all different kinds and then me answering am I finding any guys worthwhile getting their degrees up here, to which I said I wasn’t. Then he said my dad was cooking up a family reunion for the fact that everybody seemed to be drifting away in the last few years what with Vance not coming back for Christmas last year and me being away at school all the time.

“It’s lonely without you around, Joy,” he said. “Are you coming back for the reunion?”

I said I was, even though I hadn’t heard of it until just then, and we finish the pizza and hug, clapping our palms on each other’s backs. Then Clint got in his car and I walked back to my apartment with my back to his taillights.

Because it’s probably just that my dad has been so excited about building the battle site and my mother is busy playing nurse to my grandparents and Yossar never says much to me anyway, even when I’m at home. And surely they were going to call me sooner or later for the reunion. You can’t go around being suspicious of family, my dad has said to me. You can’t be questioning their motives because you just got to trust.

Yossar

My great-granduncles were in the Battle of Turkeyfoot. Turkeyfoot is our stream. It runs behind my house and also behind my brother Jessup’s house. My brother Jessup took up the land where we grew up when our parents got sick last year. His backyard used to be my backyard also. Jessup took over their house like they were dead already. He put them in a bedroom downstairs that used to be our dining room. He redecorated the walls, too. My other brother Vance has all of their hanging size pictures at his place in the city. Those would be our family photos. I had to hang pictures of other people’s parents on my walls so that I wouldn’t be lonely. My son Clint only comes by one time in any week. Sitting in a house by yourself after your son is grown can be lonely enough without pictures of your family. Sometimes it’s so

quiet that I can hear the wind knocking on my window panes—I let it in because the wind sounds lonely, too. My two brothers and me have done awful things without meaning to. It was an accident, but I think I hear footsteps or pots banging in the kitchen sometimes. I wonder if it isn't that girl's ghost. I wonder if she don't believe I'm sorry anyway.

Jessup's backyard is the battle site of Turkeyfoot. He made a sign to put in the front yard that says, "Turkeyfoot Civil War Battle Site" with an arrow, too. Jessup wants to make our backyard a tourist trap. He tells me not to call it a "trap", but that's what it is. He says to me, no, it's a battle site. I don't see the different. The point is, Jessup doesn't like Sherman—he was the general that burned up the Carolinas. Vance and Jessup fight a lot because Vance likes to tell Jessup that Sherman was necessary. Vance tells Jessup that he should feel something more than he does about that girl and that awful thing. Jessup likes to pretend that awful thing didn't happen. I wish I could. I found a picture of Sherman in an antique store once. Even through the faded brown of the picture, I was reminded of a rattlesnake. I guess Vance would say a rattlesnake needs to eat, too.

My grandmother used to say that Sherman shot people like they was dogs. I always asked her, but who shoots dogs? Sherman does, she would say. My grandmother's grandmother lived at Turkeyfoot, too. She was alive when Sherman was. Here is what happened at Turkeyfoot, as I heard it from my grandmother and as she heard it from her grandmother:

Two Jalins went through the pasture. They heard that Sherman was marching. One of them put his head on the ground. The pasture grass made his head wet. He could hear the hooves of Sherman's horses. The horses were trotting, and the other Jalin, his head not on the ground, could also hear them. They were that close. The Jalin boys ran back to the house. They grabbed guns. They told my great-great-grandmother Mom Cora Jalin that Sherman was marching. She had a chicken in the kitchen. It didn't have a head on its neck. Its head was on the counter. Mom Cora Jalin also had a pot on the stove. In it was water boiling. She told the two Jalins about Atlanta—she knew about Atlanta because that was a big city to burn. Women talked about friends there. We didn't have friends there because we were too poor to go to Atlanta. My grandmother used to say that maybe her grandmother could even see the smoke

on the southern horizon. They heard soldiers on the the road alongside the cabin. The road that they heard the soldiers on isn't there anymore, but Jessup showed me wagon wheel ruts covered up with tall grass. Some of the soldiers back then swished through the pasture grass. One Jalin still had a wet head. The other Jalin took the chicken. By now, the chicken was half-plucked. The other Jalin took the chicken outside. He threw the chicken in front of the soldiers. Sherman was there to see it.

Sherman said, "Boy, why'd you throw this chicken at me?"

Sherman's sideways hat made him seem drunk. His horse acted like the ground was tickling his hooves.

The Jalin said, "It's diseased. Don't want it."

And he spit. Sherman was sitting on the fat black horses and the Jalin spit on Sherman's shoe. Maybe that was an accident, too. Sherman took out a rag. Sherman's man took out his handgun. There was a metal pop and the Jalin who had spit fell down. He'd been shot.

Sherman's man said, "My mistake," and put his gun back. The horse got excited by the gunshot and plodded his feet where the Jalin's blood ran into the wet pasture grass. There were red hoof prints on the old road. My grandmother's grandmother saw them.

The Jalin with the wet head ran down from the porch with his gun and they shot him, too. Pretty soon, the soldiers went ahead and took the half-plucked chicken. They left across the creek. My grandmother's grandmother says they were heroes even if the soldiers got the chicken. She says they had their name in the paper. And I asked her, was they soldiers? She said that just depends. I guess that means no.

About the sign that'll go up in my brother Jessup's yard: he says the sign brings the tourists here to see the battle site. He says we should put up another sign by the highway. That another sign would bring in the Civil War folks. That they'll go anywhere if a Civil War soldier died there first. And I say, that's the problem, right there. Our Turkeyfooters weren't soldiers. They were just rebels. They were just standing up against something bigger than they were. That was all. And he says, don't that make them soldiers, too.

Vance

From this far inland, what I miss the most about home is watching the kudzu leaves before a rain storm. First you smell the swamps—fecund, sweet with rot and roiling hot snake-waters. Then the wind picks up, literally upward, into the pine trees. They hiss and bend, mixing melting pine tar into the wet aroma of swamp wafting across pasture grass or a cotton field. As the wind twists, shifts into rain-thick clouds, the kudzu flips, leaves spinning, turning—that’s how I know if it will rain, when the kudzu leaves shine out their silver undersides.

Rain storms on the back porch. I think of those, sometimes, and what they meant when I was a child. My parents, myself, my two brothers—for hours, we would sit together and not fight or demand anything from one another. We would watch that rain as it rolled from the awning and drummed that soft sleepy patter on the canvas above us. My mother had a rocking chair and it would squeak across the wood porch beneath her. Then we grew up. As much as I loved Turkeyfoot, I realized opportunity had a synonym, and it was out.

Oh, there are other things I miss, too. I miss the sticky candy feel of dried cotton exploded on the stiff branches of dormant cotton plants in November. I miss finding bobcat tracks pattering through the petunias in the garden. I miss the throbbing, violent concussions of locusts in the summer trees and open windows for the frogs to spit in their rhythmic hummings while the night birds whistle from the eaves. I miss catching snakes in the backyard with my brothers.

When I first met my wife, I was living near Turkeyfoot. Brigget wanted more for us, so we moved to the city. Charlotte isn’t bad, and Brigget and I can now walk from one end of our house to the other without falling over each other or Jemson and June. We couldn’t do that at our house in Turkeyfoot, not a chance. We had simply a one story, two bedroom mongrel of a house clapped together with siding and lead paint. We had a wooden fence on the backyard with gaping holes and missing planks replaced with chicken wire—my own doing, but the chicken wire nearly always outlasted the wooden planks. We had a stand of pine trees that was each year eaten a little more by the kudzu and a

yard that might as well have been planted with dandelions, there were so many of them. We couldn't be there long, or Brigget couldn't be there long—I was gone all day anyway, driving back and forth to Charlotte even then, just to find work that wasn't going to rip apart my hands.

Now, I try to keep one foot in Turkeyfoot with the sweet-smelling swamps and soft singing pines and one foot in Charlotte, fulfilling the degree I had received at the State school by questioning each farmer after another: “Where does it hurt/itch/burn/tickle? What pesticides did you use? When did you use them?” and so on, a clipboard resting on my left arm as I walk down a row of chairs in the waiting room. They show up with burns on their skin or a tightness in their chest—never any pain, never any weakness. These farmers would deny mortality, their wives begging for me to give them one more look anyway. I remember trying to look each of the farmers in the eye at first, man to man or doctor to man, at least, so maybe those farmers would see something of themselves in me. Maybe they might notice that I could tolerate dirt underneath my fingernails, too. Some of the victims we get in aren't farmers but farmers' wives or children or simply hapless and unlucky folks whose houses rest too near the tobacco fields. I've mostly moved out of questioning those farmers now and into the lab. Nobody is surprised by our results. DDT is bad, for example. Or don't inhale crop dust chemicals, I don't care what kind they are.

Years ago, in our backyard that is now Jessup's battle site, our father asked Yossar and Jessup and I to plow up the cotton field. He called us separately and told us each that the other brothers weren't coming. We spent the afternoon plucking arrowheads and musket balls out of the furrows, our backs bent, at first unspeaking but soon chattering to one another over this or that found artifact. Jessup found a belt buckle with the initials W.J. carved into the brass center. He held it up to the sun, triumphant, and claimed it had belonged to Willy Jalin, our great grand-uncle who was killed during the Civil War. I filled my jeans pockets with lopsided ammunition and the top chips of arrowheads. Yossar had an assortment of coins and tins of motor oil or Shineola. We laid our findings in a semi-circle before us and laughed about litter laws. One of the findings was a small metal truck Yossar recalled losing as a boy. He told Jessup he had always suspected him of stealing that truck until right then. Jessup said since he

was innocent about the truck, he was probably innocent when it came to a lot of other things, too. Yossar and I laughed and for a moment, we could all let the anger fall away. When I think of this day, it flashes before me as what could be. What a family should be like. I try to imagine myself reaching back and pulling that moment into the present, but each time I reach, it seems to drift off a little farther toward the coast.

Yossar and Jessup never went to school. Yossar became a grave digger and bought himself a backhoe, paying off small installments, each month filling an envelope with wrinkled twenty dollar bills, to the town's previous grave digger upon his retirement. Yossar services the tri-county area, burying grandparents and cousins, fallen soldiers, cancer patients—if I have the chance to get out of the lab and talk to the relatives of pesticide victims, I send them to Yossar. He doesn't need my help. He has contracts out to every funeral home and he buries large, dead animals for extra cash. There's a horse population in this area that supports a surprising number of his calls, and really, this makes sense—someone has to bury the dead horses. He claims the horse owners make more of a fuss over their dead horses than a lot of people make at the funerals for their family and friends. His business is so big now that he has my nephew, Clint, doing the horse burials for him.

Jessup flits from place to place, generally working. He's been a "landscape artist," a plumber, a carpenter, a retail sales clerk, assistant gravedigger to Yossar, etc. Each time he picks up a new profession, he likes to try and be the expert—he spends much of his time in libraries reading How-To manuals or he goes on site, following foreman and workers alike, getting into the details of the labor. How to pour concrete so it sets evenly, how to cut a bevel, the issues involved with contracts and labor disputes. Since he's been developing his Turkeyfoot plan, he sits on the back porch reading books like, *What Really Happened at Appomattox Courthouse* or *Uncle Billy: The True Story of General Sherman's March*. My niece thinks he's trying to relate to her studies—but this new knowledge is simply a means to making more money. If I try to talk to him about, say, the Battle of Bull Run, he says, "Brother, do you mean the First or Second Battle of Manassas?" If I then say, "The battle where 'Stonewall' Jackson received his nickname," he begins to quote the man: "If the Enemy is upon us, 'Then, Sir, we will give

them the bayonet!” he will exclaim, tossing his shoulders back like he was sitting up straight on a horse. If I say, “Jessup, I would like to know more about Pittsburg Landing,” he will reply, “Surely, then, you would like to hear about the Battle of Shiloh, as I know of no battle called ‘Pittsburg Landing.’” Although I already know about these battles, about the North naming battles for the features of the landscape and the South naming battles for the nearest threatened community, I enjoy seeing him interested in something educational—I like to see what might be a flit of intelligence in his eyes. I don’t mean that he’s a stupid man. But that flit of intelligence looks an awful lot like compassion, too. Like he might have some real interest in more than just making a buck. Still, all of this Civil War interest—I am not fooled. Ask him about the Massacre at Boa Ogoi. Those women clutching their children, the hands of their elderly fathers, pushing chunks of ice with free hands while swimming side-stroke, Union bullets puncturing the waters, puncturing grandfathers—the warriors pulsing forth arrows from the canyon, too far to save the women, too far to save the children. He doesn’t know about this battle and maybe he just doesn’t care because he thinks, what can it do for me, to know that. Sometimes, though, when I see that glint, I wonder what if. What if he had gone to school, too—what could he have been?

The back pasture used to be a cotton field—that’s what our dad planted originally. Just before he got sick, he changed over to soybeans. The first year he was gone, that was the year Yossar and Jessup and I plowed the field over. The cotton field is plowed over, the field he wanted to plant soybeans in is grown over with chickweed and grasses—with the cotton and the soybeans and the yellow tobacco fields of our neighbors came the pesticides, and those don’t differentiate between “pests” and “people”, as I have mentioned before. This surprises no one now, and yet, the need to kill the boll weevils and tobacco worms remains—how do we will the bad bugs, save the good bugs, and still find a way not to kill ourselves in the process? I am working on the answer to this question. In the meantime, the land grows fallow. It’s becoming feral. The pasture, like a dog, is wild again—mistrusting of humans, wary of a farmer’s hand. Weeds have filled in the plow furrows. A wild rose pushed up from my grandmother’s grave in the family plot, yet the vine will not flower. The native plants do not yet trust us to let them live.

So I ask myself, how does a family keep from fracturing when the parents die? My sister-in-law, Sable, has been calling me from Turkeyfoot for weeks, describing the deterioration of my parents' faces. They are shells, she says. Their eyes are sinking in. She whispers into the phone and begs me to come home to check on them. They won't go to the hospital, she says. They want to die at Turkeyfoot. My brother, she claims, has moved my parents into the dining room on the first floor. Sable tells me she tries to keep the door open so that she can hear their rasping calls if they need anything. She says Jessup closes that door without even looking in at them, as if the room is empty. When she calls, I answer the phone before Brigget can reach it, and listen to brother's wife speak my name, her voice coming through as if on dove's wings.

My parents, both of them, are dying from pesticide induced lung cancer. When my mother was diagnosed before my father got ill, she joked that I must have poisoned her, just to make her my own private case study. She said she bet I couldn't wait to get her all lined out on the autopsy table to see what her insides looked like. Jessup said he'd always wondered what she'd used in place of a heart. My brothers and I stood around her bed and laughed so that our father, sitting on a chair in the corner of the hospital room, wouldn't see any of us cry. I remember that feeling of shaking—my body saying laugh let me shake through laughter if not through sorrow.

My father was diagnosed a week after my mother—he had begun to cough splatters of blood onto her bed sheets. He called me, terrified. When I arrived at Turkeyfoot, I was met with Sable carrying out a small trash can filled with bloodied tissues.

After Brigget goes to sleep at night, sometimes I picture what the morgue can do to a human body, skin blue and pulled across the bones. I've traced the purpled veins of other people's relatives up and down their stiff arms, pinched out black tongues from numb blue lips, held the tumored lungs of someone else's brother, sister, mother, father. The hospital tells me I don't have to be present for the autopsy of my parents, but this will be my flesh they are cutting into, my bones they will be separating to expose my blood vessels. I wonder—should I stay, shivering in the basement cold before the tense skull-

smile on my father's face? Or until they pull my mother's rib cage apart—she splitting with the wet cracking of frozen chicken legs?

Sable, her dove-winged voice, calls me again—second time in the week:

“Their voices are going,” she says. “Your mother can hardly swallow. Your father eats nothing. He says he is on a hunger strike until your mother drinks water.”

“Yes,” I say. I have seen this before—this is the giving up. This is my mother having enough and she plans on taking my father with her.

“Death could bring us together,” Sable says. “I want that for them.”

“It could breed conflict,” I say. I imagine her in her kitchen, sunlight twisting in her black hair, the tips of her fingers setting just at the edge of her lips.

“They deserve to see everyone once more before they die. This is something I want for them.”

“What do you have in mind?” I ask. Brigget glances at me from the couch. She rises her eyebrows and clucks softly to let me know that she can see I am talking to Sable.

“I want to have a family reunion. I want this reunion to be one without conflict or fighting or people storming away. Your parents deserve this.”

“I wish I could promise you that,” I say. Brigget slams her magazine together, gets up from the couch, and leaves the room.

“I would also like for you to promise that,” she says. “The conflict you speak of begins with you three brothers. Do not say to me that they start it. I have already heard this from Jessup.”

“I promise, then,” I say. “What can I do to help?”

“I need you to make phone calls,” she says. “We need to have this soon. They are dying, Vance.”

And my name in her mouth—her teeth brushing across that bottom lip, her jaw shifting just forward.

“Okay,” I say. “When?”

“Soon. Joy is finished with school this week. You will call everyone,” she says. “Do not leave anyone from the list that has a drop of Jalin blood. And call Joy. You talk to her more than anyone else does.”

Clint

My Aunt Sable tells me that I live too close to death. She doesn't mean that I'm dangerous or take too many risks with my body or my limbs, she simply means that I spend too much time hanging around with dead things. She says the living need to try and forget the dead as soon as they're in the ground. She says as soon as someone is dead, that's when you can't get away from them—they become static in your mind and permanent, just as if their dying sets them like concrete into the empty places in your brain.

My whole life I've been next to my dad on his backhoe, digging graves for people, holes for dead horses, trees, or anything else we can get paid to dig for. It used to be I was small enough to ride right in his lap while he dug. People would be surprised by the things we find in the broken soil. Fractured arrowheads, buttons, rusted bullets or shells, bottle caps, severed arms of plastic dolls, quarters, bolts, horseshoe nails, sometimes horseshoes, china plate shards—if what we find is small enough, it winds up in my dad's pockets. We see children on the street, and he reaches in to give them something pulled up from the dirt. My dad has a window ledge in his kitchen lined with small metal toys. A brontosaurus loops its neck over a World War Two Jeep. He also has a glass jar of doll's eyes—they look out in all directions with green and blue eyes, stacked close together like beans in a cupboard. Another thing my dad has in his house is a collection of framed black and white photographs he bought in a flea market. We don't know these people, yet when we sit in his living room and plan out the day's digs, they listen with dead ears and nod with still eyes. These framed people belong to somebody. Maybe their families miss their pictures. But then, I guess it was the family that sold off the frame in the first place.

My dad used to do all of the digging but he is getting older now and he prefers to do the high-dollar digging, which is graves for people. He leaves me to do the other diggings by myself so that he can

stay home and answer phone calls for more digging. I go out, and when I come back, he usually has another job for me. He's been home a lot lately, because it's not the people that are dying, it's the horses. Sometimes, sitting in his living room with the flea market photographs, we get into disagreements about which is worse: digging a hole for a horse or digging a grave for a person. My dad doesn't even think—he says it's worse with the people, always. He says it's because people that maybe didn't even like the person who's being buried suddenly feel like grieving, too. I say it's worse digging for the horses because a lot of the time, it's women and kids and whatever horse it was that has died probably died some horrible death thrashing or collapsing or spinning—seems like the horses never just die in their sleep. The ones that do, well, those are the ones the family has had for thirty years or something and it might as well be like losing a family member. It's really no different to a lot of them.

At any rate, he sends me alone to do the horse digging, which is fine because it's good money and I can usually get there after the horse is already dead. Watching them die is the worst part, for me, and I'll say I have watched too many of them die. Doesn't matter, my dad tells me, because he says it gets easier. You stop feeling anything when you see them flat down with their bellies pushed up against the ground beneath them. So my dad and me are sitting on his plaid couches while somebody's framed family member watches us and I haven't been here but five minutes when my dad says, "You've got a call."

"What is it?" I ask him, but there isn't any need for me to ask that. I can tell by how deep he's set in the couch that the call's not about a person.

"A horse that's down, almost dead," he says. We're watching golf. The golfers on TV interrupt him with clops when they take their swings.

"Okay, so it's not dead. And?" I ask. I have to get his attention from the TV.

"And they didn't want it to stiffen up," he says.

Which means that these people, whoever they are, have been around a dead horse before. It's a problem if they stiffen up because it makes them hard to move and if we have to drag the body over to the hole, then the body gets scratched open and the rocks and sand can take the hide off. That all goes back

to what I say to my dad about horses being worse—these are supposed to be beautiful creatures and their owners get all bent out of shape if the hide gets scuffed up.

“Are they going to call you when it’s dead?” I ask. “Or should I just—“

“You don’t want it to die before you get there,” he says. “So you should go.”

When I get there in the backhoe, which does take awhile, there are three people standing around it—two women and a girl. They make a triangle around the dying spotted horse. The kid stands with her arms held out to the horse’s face. I’ve seen other horses roll their eyes or bash their heads against the ground, but this one has his head up and his blank eyes watch the kid as she waives her hand in front of his head. I get closer and see that the kid has a carrot in her hand that she keeps pushing against the muzzle of the spotted horse, trying to lift the horse’s lips apart to fit the carrot inside.

“Oh, God, Emily stop it!” one of the women whines, and her words come choking through moans in her chest. She doesn’t look up when she hears my backhoe coming, and I see her bend in half and press her face into the horse’s mane, which is hanging like dreadlocks for all the dried mud. The other woman has her arms crossed. She watches me roll down the hill. Beyond her is a ridge with dogwood trees all lit up with white and pink flowers. I cut the engine to the backhoe and the metal inside squeals to a stop.

“Is this the horse?” I ask the woman with her arms crossed. Mostly, I want to get their attention so the woman will stop sobbing into the horse’s mane. She leans over the horse like I could imagine a gunfighter’s wife over her shot husband—doing the dramatics, the oh-please-god-nos, clutching the horse’s neck like a hand. In her free hand, she has three or four blue ribbons and a medal attached to blue nylon.

“It’s not time yet,” the woman on the ground says. She says it into the horse, still not having once looked in my direction. “He’s not there.”

Emily, the girl whose name I heard, rubs the woman’s back with her opposite hand while the bag of carrots swishes against her pants legs. Carrots are falling out of the horse’s mouth unchewed.

“We can wait,” I say. I’m thinking about my dad on the couch, watching golf all afternoon until he’ll get up and make himself pasta or some such thing. “How long do you think?”

“It’s been like this for at least three hours,” this other woman says, and I haven’t noticed her before because of feeling so bad for the woman leaning on the spotted horse. It’s like the light has shifted and the dogwood flowers behind her look fuzzy and warm like some kind of romance movie, and all I need is a gust of wind to go through her hair right now and I might as well call it love because I can’t stop staring at her. Her hair is even blacker than my Aunt Sable’s—so black the sun catches it trying to be purple when she lets the straightness of it fall over her face.

“What?” she says to me with her arms still crossed. I look down at the horse real quick, having been caught staring.

“Oh Jesus, I didn’t want it to be like this!” The other woman starts up again. I guess I’m not surprised. “I don’t want to bury him in the cold ground. Jesus, oh God, this is what I deserve.”

The sobbing woman puts her face against the horse’s crest and grabs his stiff head into her lap. The horse pulls a groan from his deep chest and blows out a splatter of snot onto her jeans. It’s like she doesn’t even notice.

“He was a good horse,” the black haired woman says. I don’t know if that was true or not because she looks like some kind of gypsy girl with that dark hair, like someone you might not could trust. She holds her hand out palm up, as if the horse is a surprising disappointment.

“Oh God, Major, oh Jesus God,” the woman on the ground wails.

The horse seems closer to my feet with its head in the woman’s lap. I don’t remember the kid moving, but she’s leaning over the barrel of the horse. The black haired woman rolls her eyes behind their backs and comes over to where I’m standing, a little off from the unfamiliar horse.

“An hour? Maybe less?” I ask her. She moves with stiff shoulders, as though anybody walking in her path might want to move lest they knock into one of her arms.

“Could be,” she said. “We called near three hours ago.”

“That might be my fault,” I say. “It’s a family business. I didn’t get over until nine or so this morning.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she says. Then she leans into me. I can feel the soft black hair on her arms brushing my hands. “It would be so much easier if this horse would just die, you know?”

“Clint,” I say. It comes out how I don’t want—twisted, like I’m trying to describe a particular kind of rock or pointing to a street sign.

“What?”

“That’s my name,” I say.

“Okay,” she says. “Trinnie. That’s Anna on the horse’s neck. Her daughter, Emily. The horse is Major. He’s not old.”

“Nice looking animal,” I say. “Good hip on him.”

“Are you a horse man?” she asks.

“You learn a surprising amount just from burying them. They’re just big dogs, and I like dogs,” I say. “This your horse?”

“No, it’s Anna’s. That was her favorite. Claims they were bonded, that she knew as soon as he got the parasite—like he told her in her mind. That’s what she thinks, anyway.”

“I guess it’s possible,” I say. “Can I see?”

“See what?”

“How close. I don’t like to see them go slow,” I say.

We step down to where the spotted horse sprawls on the pasture grass. Emily has her knees in the mud in front of his face now. Trinnie and I watch her chew off half a carrot and slide the other half in between the horse’s lips. The carrot pokes out a little orange cigar and I try to keep from smiling about it.

“This your horse, honey?” I ask Emily. Its sides are going up and down off rhythm. I figure it won’t be much longer.

“Yes. I’m feeding Major carrots,” she says. “Because carrots are his favorite. But he doesn’t want to eat them.”

“Oh no no no stop it, please just don’t,” Anna starts up.

“Emily, Major doesn’t want carrots,” Trinnie says. “He wants to be left alone.”

The horse gurgles. When they get this bad, I think, if I had a gun. If I could pull the trigger if I had a gun.

Then the horse just falls clean over—his neck collapses and his head falls right into the mud. His long face pulls out of Anna’s wrapping arms and then she’s in the mud, too. She sloshes around until she can get on her knees. Trinnie and I watch Emily and Anna’s hands on the spotted horse’s flank and crest, rubbing and rubbing with the horse’s moaning and the short orange carrots still falling unchewed out of his mouth.

“This looks like the end,” Trinnie says. Her lips are suddenly tight across her teeth—I hadn’t thought she cared about the horse dying until I saw her lips.

“He’s dying oh Jesus dying dying dying no he can’t, please don’t,” Anna starts chanting, her mouth pressed into the horse’s crest even though he’s halfway in the mud.

“You should get the thing now,” Trinnie says to me. Her whole face—so tight.

“You mean the backhoe?” I ask. “I want to be sure. I’m afraid it might spook the horse.”

I’ve been to scenes like this before—kids and women screaming over dying horses. People think the horse is only focused on dying, but that’s not true. I’ve seen them spook, like they think they can still outrun death if they just get the right motivation.

“That horse?” Trinnie says. “The one that’s dying? He’ll never notice.”

“They get funny,” I say.

“You might as well dig the hole now,” she says. “Then we can get out of the mud a little quicker.”

So I have to stand here thinking about whether or not I should go, all the while watching the kid and Anna with their hands on the horse, seeing if the horse’s eyes were moving much, and catching from the corner of my vision Trinnie’s forefinger touching the tears off her eyelids. Finally, the horse takes in

a deep breath. His barrel inflates such that I can count every rib down his spotted side, and then he lets it all out—the last of his air whooshing from his chest in a groan. Only his nostrils tremble a little.

And that's the end. I go off and get in the backhoe, trying not to think about that poor horse and instead listening to the coming down the hill broken-earth noise of the machine. I have the backhoe nearly through a chunk of pines when the spotted horse all of a sudden comes right back to life and lifts his head out of the mud. So I know he's seen the sun glinting off the yellow metal scoop and I think now we're going to have a real mess on our hands. Before I can get the machine off to say something to Anna and the kid, the horse rips its head off of Anna's lap and begins thrashing with its front legs.

"He's trying to get up!" I hear one of the women say. I can't tell which one because the engine is just eating their voices.

Major, suddenly mobile, flicks his head against the kid's chest and flattens her on his forehead, which makes her fall back into the mud. Anna tries to throw her arms around the horse's neck and is lifted from where she was sitting, the horse twisting in her grip until he snatches himself free from her. And here I am—I can't get the switch to turn in the backhoe and so it rolls closer. The horse begins dragging its upper body away from Anna on its front legs, its back legs leaving trailers, its tail dusting between the ruts. And damn it if the horse isn't half-paralyzed and running away: it crawls past Emily on the ground, his legs pulling in the motion of a gallop but his hind legs dragging along behind.

"Oh God! He's running! Stop him! You have to stop him!" Anna begins to scream at me.

But I still can't get the backhoe to stop. I try to yell at them to catch the horse, but the motor swallows my voice, too. Clods of dirt whip up behind the tracks of the backhoe and clack against the metal side, which sends the horse's front legs into a full-tilt gallop with its stifles pulling across the ground beneath it. Trinnie lifts her arms and crosses and uncrosses them above her head so that I will see and stop, but I can't get the thing to stop and so I steer toward a corner in the pasture away from the kid on the ground. I can do that, at least.

I get the motor stopped in that corner and the backhoe quit rolls and with the engine off, I can just hear Emily doing a kid's hiccup sobbing and Anna yelling the horse's name over and over. By now, the

horse has pulled near all of the skin off his hind legs, which look bad enough stretched out like a dog's behind him. I watch the horse smudge his own blood across the field, his legs pawing forward slower, then slower, and then he falls. Anna goes for the horse, but Trinnie grabs her and brings her over to where I'm standing, over still in the corner of the pasture.

"You go," Trinnie says. From where we stand, the horse is not moving.

I try to squint my eyes to see if the horse's sides are lifting, even a little, but I can't see any definition of his body.

"You have to go," Trinnie say. "Anna can't see it. Besides, this is your fault."

"Now wait a minute," I start to say, because I warned her, but Anna has her face into her hands and I just feel awful that she's had to see her horse twisted up in ways no horse is supposed to be. I don't say anything and set off down to where the horse fell.

It takes a minute or two to walk down the hill, and when I get there, I can't help but think how glad I am that it's me and not the women that came down to see what the horse has done to itself. The horse has torn open its haunches as it dragged them behind, and that's not the worst because one of the back legs has snapped clear in half. Its cannon bone and hoof are flipped out at a square angle to the body.

"Can we fix it?" Emily is next to me, and I'm left wondering why those two women didn't take a better hold of her. Her shirt's ripped from when the horse had hit her with its face and I can see the white of her back clean through the tear. She still has the bag of carrots in her hand and in the other hand she's carrying a long stick or pole of some kind. She pokes the end of the stick into the horse's side and its flesh sucks in. The horse doesn't even twitch as she pushes the stick into its side again and again.

"Come on," I say to her. "Let's go back to your mom."

"Our vet can fix it. We had a dog that broke its leg once, too."

Emily pulls a blue ribbon out of her pocket, just a single strip of ribbon with a gold horse head on it and the words, "First Place." Emily hooks the ribbon onto the horse's halter latch.

“I don’t think the vet can save this one, honey,” I say. There’s no sense in lying to children.
“Major is going to die.”

“Good boy,” she says, like the horse has just won the ribbon. She touches her face with one hand.

“I told myself I wouldn’t cry.”

“I don’t see any harm in it,” I say.

“Crying won’t bring him back, though,” she says. “Goodbye, Major.”

She pats his head and follows me to where Trinnie and Anna stand waiting. I start to go off so I can dig the hole for the horse. Plus, I have to fish out the chains since I’ll have to drag it over.

“What do we do now?” Trinnie asks me. “Anna wants him buried with her old horses under the dogwoods.”

“We have to get him from there into the hole somehow,” I say.

“Can’t you use the scoop?”

“It drags, but it doesn’t lift well,” I say. “I’m going to have use chains. They usually get cut up pretty bad that way.”

“What if he’s not dead yet?” she asks. “I don’t want him to get buried alive.”

“Do you want to go have a look?” I ask.

Trinnie nods and we begin to walk back down with Anna toward the horse. I try to walk so that our forearms brush as they move in opposite angles at our sides. I get goosebumps where the hairs of her arms touch me. When we get to the still body, I put my finger to my lips and we stand quietly. I lay my palm on the horse’s flat girth and then lean my head like my dad taught me to so that my ear rests on the spotted side, too. The horse’s tail twitches patternless between his hind legs and the flies land on the body for a long time, leaving me wondering if the tail is twitching from the nerves or if the horse is still alive somehow. Eventually, I push myself off of the horse and stand up, knocking dirt from my pants legs with my hands.

“He’s gone,” I say. “No pulse.”

It's a guess, but the horse is far enough gone. Even if it isn't all the way dead, its body's probably in shock from that leg break. Still, though, I have to wonder what it will feel like for the horse when I have to drag it to the hole. It's something I don't want to think about.

"Nonononononono—he can't no no no," Anna hums into the horse's ear, like it's a child that's having trouble sleeping. The flies are getting bad now that the horse is dead or near dead, and they land on Anna's eyes and mouth. Still, she doesn't even seem to notice. I go back to the backhoe to start digging the hole.

I can get a hole done fairly quick after a couple years' of practice. Once it's dug out over by the dogwoods where Anna's old horses are buried, Anna goes inside while Emily and Trinnie watch me drag the horse several hundred yards to the hole. The chains are tight against the weight of the horse and while I half expect to hear them jangle, I only hear the motor and the heavy drag of the horse's body being pulled over soil and rock. I tug the horse directly to the hole and turn to watch it slide down the slanted edges of dirt and settle at the bottom, its neck twisting up against the far wall so that its face seems to be looking back at us.

"I don't like his neck like that," Emily says. "He looks so uncomfortable."

Most of the horses die with their eyes open and their eyes never shut again unless you close them with your fingers. I've seen other women do that for their horses. I move the backhoe and begin pushing dirt onto the horse's body. Trinnie tries to hold back the kid as the dirt comes down and the horse's body is eventually covered. I track how far into the day we are getting by the angle of the sun but every time I think about going back to my dad's so I can sit next to him on the couch, that same sun twists into Trinnie's black hair or the wind lifts her bangs and then I don't want to leave all of a sudden. I use the scoop on the backhoe to flatten the surface of the grave, hoping that Trinnie might come over and we could talk about getting together sometime without dead horses or the strange kid, but she stands off with Anna and holds her hand against Anna's shoulder. The sun begins to angle such through the pines that I can imagine my dad at his house putting a pot of boiling water on the stove. I get out of the backhoe long enough to take a check from Anna.

“Nice to meet you,” I say to Trinnie. “Maybe under different circumstances—“

“Thanks for coming out to help,” she says. Never once does she look at me. Behind her, Anna’s other horses have shouldered up to the fence line, waiting to be brought in for their dinner. I get back in and roll the backhoe up the hill toward my dad’s house. Looking back from the top of the hill, I try to just once more to see if I can catch another sight of Trinnie, but all I can see is Emily making angle figures in the loose soil on the horse’s mounded grave.

Sable

Tomorrow my daughter comes home. Vance tells me that she will arrive in the late morning, around ten, after she has turned in her final papers and driven back from her school. I will have a casserole out of the oven for her at noon, and we will eat in front of cookbooks and make lists of ingredients, equipments, serving dishes, and presentations. Then we will ride together in her car into town and buy what is necessary from the grocery store. We will collect color samples from the fabric store for the table cloths and purchase matching napkin rings. If she says she needs to do some shopping for herself, I will take her to clothing stores and wait outside of the dressing rooms until she appears in bright skirts or shirts, spinning before me while I try to catch a glimpse at the price listed on the tags. I will pretend, if we go shopping, that money is not of the issue. I will tell her that if she likes it, we will buy it. Later, when we return home, we will sit in front of the TV and hand-stitch “Jalin” into the corners of our new linens. I will ask her questions about her History papers. Jessup will likely explain to her how her new summer job will be conducted. When she awakes the day after tomorrow, I will have cereal waiting on the table for her. We will have coffee together on the porch and discuss her life and her plans for moving in the future. Then we will change the sheets together on her grandparents’ beds, she holding them up in turn while I shake out fitted sheets and tuck in elastic edges underneath the mattresses.

At some point, Joy will ask why I have not called. I am prepared for this question, and yet I do not know how to answer her. I would like to explain that I am afraid to call her, but this is a fear a child could not understand. I say “child,” and I must correct myself—Joy would not allow herself to be called

a child. She has been away to school for three years, and still I am afraid that if I call her, I will beckon her home. I worry that the pull of “home” will outweigh her chances at a good education. I cannot allow this, and so I do not call her at all. Perhaps she will be angry with me. If she is, I will likely change the subject and ask for her help preparing something else for the reunion this weekend.

I am also afraid of what Jessup will do when his brothers come this weekend. His parents are dying, and I believe he would like to deny that this is true, because he does not seem concern with their deteriorating health. We have lived with them for several years now because we could no longer afford to live on our own. Jessup has made promises to me that he will find employment, and when I ask him when, he defends himself by telling me that developing a historic site is indeed employment. He is excited to show the family at the reunion how much work he has put into creating the Turkeyfoot Battle Site, which is an endeavor based on a Jalin family story handed down from the Civil War generation. Jessup tells me when his parents die, they will leave him Turkeyfoot. Then, he says to me, we can make money by charging admission to the site, selling souvenirs, and leading guided tours. While I am inside the house fetching glasses of water and peanut butter sandwiches for his dying parents, he fusses with the old cabin in the backyard. This morning, his mother asked if he was ever going to come and see her. I told Jessup this when he came in for lunch, and he said that he had too much work to do on the property if it was going to look like an authentic battle site before the reunion. Then he said that he would need Joy when she came home tomorrow. He said that he would not finish everything unless he had Joy’s help.

When my daughter comes home tomorrow, I will pretend that I do not see Jessup’s family. Look at her nose, I will say to myself. From the side, it has a bump like Jessup’s, but from the front, it rounds to a point, just like mine. Look at the color of her eyes—when the light is faint, they are like wet clay and I see my grandmother looking at me from decades ago. I will remind myself not to look at her hair, which is the brown tabby-cat color of Jessup’s, and I will not look at her eyebrows, which are like fat rectangles pushing down on her eyes, and I will not look at her when she is frustrated and pushes her bangs up on her forehead because these are the ways in which she reminds me of Jessup’s family. I am a mother and I do not dislike Jessup’s family because they are also my family, even if I did not want them,

but can a mother not want more for her children? Can a mother not be expected to want her only child to find a road that leads to a bigger part of the world than Turkeyfoot?

I did not ever expect to leave the mountains where I was born only to find myself in flat tobacco country. No one could ever understand what a shock I had for years each time I saw the horizon and kept seeing the horizon and the sun would set in the winter but without the mountains to tuck it in at night, and the far edge of the sky just kept glowing red and angry while the sun burned the crispy round skyline. I expected eventually to trade mountains for Jessup and this is my fate for loving him, but I fear for Joy—I fear that she will find a man to shackle her to the farmland. I am at fault for my own fate because I picked Jessup and knew immediately that I would have to give up my mountains to be with him. On days like today when I find myself frustrated with him, I try to remember both of us in line at a grocery store with Chilean peaches in our basket and he saying to me, “Don’t we both know better than to buy our peaches from a grocery store when we could just as soon buy them off the side of the road?” I am at terms with my trade but what is to become of Joy, I ask myself. And I did not know when I came to this countryside that I would be asked to not only mother my own child, but that I would also find myself responsible for mothering another woman’s child in my brother-in-law’s son, Clint. Clint came to us soon after Joy was born, I loved Clint as much as I could but never the same as I loved Joy because I had no one except myself to blame when Joy was naughty, but when Clint would misbehave, I could always say to myself that he was not my child, that he was the child of a woman my brother-in-law Yossar met at a funeral of all places. I could say to myself that relationship must have been surely dead from the onset, except it produced a life that that woman maybe had not expected and so she left Yossar to deal with the live results of their fling. How that woman expected a man to do both the mothering and fathering of a single son is beyond me. I still say to myself when I see Clint poking around the town with no forward motion in life that I did the best I could but with a father like Yossar, a man who spends his days plowing dead bodies into the earth from a seat in a backhoe, did I ever stand a chance against that sort of future?

I remember there was a day when I had to choose opportunity for either Clint or Joy, but no one ever knew this but my other brother-in-law and me. Clint and Joy were both nearing eighteen when my

brother-in-law Vance came to see me at Turkeyfoot. Jessup and Joy were out buying building supplies, as we had recently moved in to Turkeyfoot and they were refurbishing the old Jalin cabin. The grandparents were not ill at the time, and they were walking the swamp line as they used to like to do. Vance and I sat out on the back porch with ice tea in our hands, leaning back in our lounge chairs and listening to the frogs rubbing their throats over in the swamps. We had been talking about Vance's children, June and Jemson, and how they were just doing so well at their respective out-of-state universities when Vance turned to me and said:

“There's only money for one of them, but I want to do it. For you.”

The words may not have been clear enough to some people if he would have said it to them, but I knew what he meant before he spoke because the look on his face said *try*.

“Only one,” I repeated, because I had to give Vance the impression that a choice would be difficult. Of course, it was not.

“It's up to you which one,” he said.

“Where did the money come from?”

“Jemson got a scholarship,” he said. “Brigget and I over-budgeted. I wanted to do it for both, but Brigget said we have to pick. She wants a sunroom built on the side of the house with the rest of what's left over.”

“You know who has more promise,” I said. I remembering wanting to feel terrible for having already made up my mind, but a mother has a right to have different feelings than an aunt.

“What should I tell Clint?”

Vance let these words out as soft as cat paws. I remember thinking that he truly was the only gentleman left in the world.

“He does not need a reason,” I said. “He has the backhoe business—what would Joy have without college?”

Somehow Vance got the money to Joy without Jessup knowing, and Joy and I have told him since that she is on a scholarship. This is part of Vance's stipulations—Jessup may not know where the money

trickles from. Joy went away to college the following year and I began to be proud of myself for making the right decision—the only decision. I tell anyone who will listen that my daughter is a college girl. She is a scholar, away at a university studying History and Science and Literature. She will have a new home and a job that does not involve ruining one's hands and a husband that travels and maybe he will take her along and she will travel, too. These are the hopes I hold for her. There is so much in the world I have missed that I want her to see.

Joy

My first stop when I get home is straight to the family plot out back. I don't even walk through the house to see my mother or my grandparents—I go out to the cemetery and wander around through the stones. Some of the grave stones go as far back as George Washington's lifetime or the French and Indian War. The names on these older stones are fading off, so worn by now that you could only tell what the engraving says if you take a rubbing with paper and pencil. Beneath these older stones may just be the bonedust of our ancestors, but these people are our roots, buried deep and still growing, still plowing our claim into the soil. You could liken it to plants—anybody would have to dig deep to pull our roots out of this land. Before I went to college, I used to keep the rectangles laid out before the tombstones cleared of cacti and kudzu, pulling the plants from beneath the worn numbers forming birth to death. Now, I kneel before one of the older stones and run my hand along the top curve of granite, just to remind him that I haven't forgotten him. I can't read the name, but I know from a crayon etching hanging in the house that this is the grave of Colton Jalin. I have been doing this for years, and while the flat fronts of the stones are pocked with moss and the names are half-filled with crumbling dirt, the tops of the stones are worn smooth from the palms of my hands.

Behind the cemetery, the creek croaks in the same voice today that it did a century and a half ago. Vines crawl out of the creek bed and swallow the pines along the far bank. This part of the country stretches flat to the Atlantic and small clouds vibrate from the ocean across the sky. In the summer here the humming of the tree frogs and insects trembles in time with the thick, visible heat—when we were

children, my cousin Clint and I, we would swim in farm ponds or in slow, thick rivers, pretending that the fat heat of the water might cool us anyway. Shade has always been hot, too, and the rolls of air tumble across our yard from the back pasture over the cabin and to my grandparent's house beyond. On any given Saturday since we moved in with my grandparents, my dad could be sanding a rocking chair on the stoop of the cabin while my mother might stand at the back sliding door of their house on a cordless phone. Nothing might move except my dad's rocking hands on the wood of the chair and the wet fingers of heat expanding across the flat yard. And me, I would be watching from where I sit on a rusted bench in the cemetery.

We've been on this particular patch of land longer than anyone else, which is information that you would have to know how to find in long, flat county records books in a library. 1752—the first Jalin in Aberdeen County, fresh from the boat. I like to think his hair still had sea salt in it and that the cuffs of his pants were likely still wet from the ocean. He was the Jalin that was given this land in exchange for farming. The Jalin family has always and will always live right here on this farm and it isn't going anywhere, not when my grandparents die and not even when I am dead, too. That's a testament to our devotion. Proof that we don't give up and walk off, not even in the face of a man like Sherman.

I was not born on this land but my dad was, and when my parents and I first came to live here, my dad and I walked along the banks of our Turkeyfoot creek. We trudged through hot fog rolling off the pasture, both of us slant-walking on the steep edges of the creek bed and making plans for rebuilding the cabin. As we walked, a water moccasin suddenly emerged in the creek, its body too short for its width, and it twisted out of the water to look at us with its sticky pinkish-white mouth open. My dad said something about snakes and General Sherman, and when I asked him to repeat it, he said, "Joy, have I ever told you about where you came from?"

I told him he had.

And my dad said, "What you don't know is that history teaches us everything, including the future."

"Who said that?" I asked him.

“I don’t know. Voltaire. Doesn’t matter. The point is, you need to know about where you came from if you’re ever going to know about where you are going.”

Instead of sliding underneath the flat vine leaves, the snake pulled itself into a catch of sunlight. It closed its mouth and spiraled its fat body, black and shined like a cast-off tire. It rested across our path on the twists of kudzu. Yellow needles cracked dry under our shoes as we stood watching the snake.

“Sit down, Joy,” my dad said. “I want to tell you a story.”

We sat cross-legged on the banks of the creek, watching the water moccasin sun itself, and my father told me the story of the Battle of Turkeyfoot. He told me that we had ancestors who had fought and died for the Confederacy on this very patch of land—their names were Willy and Cole—and that they had died defending ideals like Honor, Family, Womanhood, and Heroism. He said they were cut down by General Sherman and his men, and that our land had been plundered and raped by the Union Army. We were poor now, he said, because Sherman burned our livelihood and tarnished our silver. We were poor and it was Sherman’s fault.

When he was through with the story, he said, “We are going to restore this land to what it should be. We are going to restore the cabin, clean up the cemetery, and make landmarks for the key points of the battle. Eventually, I want to replant the fields with tobacco as they were before your grandpa let them go. I’ve got a job waiting for you, too, Joy. You’re going to be my tour guide. I’ll be the groundskeeper. Your mother will be our secretary. Can you imagine? It’ll be a booming success.”

Then my grandparents got sick. I sneaked off to college on Vance’s money. Until I came back today, I had assumed my dad gave up that battle site dream.

I rub my hand one more time across the top of Colton’s grave and head back over to the house to say hello to my mother. Walking by the cabin, my dad suddenly pops out with a hammer in one hand and leveler in the other.

“Joy,” he says. “You’re just in time to help. Get out of those clothes and get back out here.”

I had hoped to come home and find him helping my mother get ready for the reunion, and yet here he is, still working on restoring the cabin.

“I haven’t been in yet to see Mom,” I say. “She’s expecting me.”

“Then say hello and come back out here. I need your help holding the frame of the bed together.”

“Can’t Clint help you do that later?” I ask him. “Don’t we have a lot to get done before the reunion?”

“You’re darn right,” he says. “Like getting this cabin together so that anybody who’s asking can see this battle site is the for-real deal. It’s taking off.”

I nod to him with no intention of coming back out to hold the bed frame. I turn to walk the rest of the way to the house, with the tall grass scratching on my bare ankles. I still need to unpack, to help my mother get recipes together, to say hello to my dying grandparents. When I was a child, my grandparents had held family reunions on the Jalin homestead every year. My cousins and I would wander on our grass-scratched bare feet into the creek, stripped down to our underwear as we let our cotton undergarments billow out against the current of the stream, sometimes fast from mountain rainstorms farther east or mostly slow from farmers siphoning the clear water in times of drought. While the older family members would congregate and eat on the back porch, my grandfather tending the grill, the cousins and I wandered about playing hide and seek in the cotton field or exploring the pushed over rotten logs in the cabin—my grandfather never saw any point in restoring it. We would come back with our arms red from the rough tobacco leaves in the neighbor’s field or with our legs eaten into a rash by mosquitoes—sometimes the boys had leeches on their ankles from the swamp and our aunts would scream until my mother came and pulled them off with a credit card. Each year, we would return to the homestead and there would be fewer cousins, fewer aunts and uncles. There were excuses, college visits, business meetings, shifts that couldn’t be covered, and cars that broke down—then, the reunion was simply my mother, my dad, me, Clint, my Uncle Yossar, and my grandparents. That year, we bought a bucket of fried chicken and Styrofoam containers of mash potatoes and watched TV with greasy fingers. Laugh tracks replaced our actual talking. If one of us got up and left the room, nobody mentioned it. Eventually, my grandmother sighed like a final breath and left us for the bedroom.

My mother grabs her arms around me and then lets me go fast as I step in from the sliding door, as if I might chastise her for hugging me.

“Have you been homesick?” she asks. “Are you glad to be home?”

“Yes,” I say.

“No. I doubt you were homesick. You are loving being away,” she says. “Come see your grandparents.”

“I did miss home,” I say.

She pushes against the small of my back and we move in the direction of the dining room where they are keeping my grandparents. The door is propped open by a box fan that blows the edges of the sheets on the twin beds. The room is shaded against the midmorning sun so that their faces are only shadows to me. The thin sheets sink between the narrow outlines of my grandparents’ bodies. They both lie flat on their backs.

“They are asleep,” she says, as if showing me a newborn baby. “Whisper so you do not waken them.”

“How are they?” I ask. I can’t tell if they are truly breathing or if the fan is simply fluttering the sheets on their chests.

“They are dying. They will not survive for long now.”

“That’s terrible,” I say. “There’s nothing more that can be done?”

“There is no fix for old age. Come. I need your help,” she says, pushing me back to the kitchen.

The countertops are lined with cut and uncut produce. Bowls of various sizes contain tomatoes, onions, garlic, potatoes, and greens.

“I went shopping early,” she says. “We can still go back if we find a recipe that needs something we do not have. And there is a sale, if you are needing any new clothes.”

“Dad wants help with the cabin,” I say. “I feel like I should go help him when we’re through.”

My mother turns to stare at me. She has a bowl of grape tomatoes in her hands. For a moment, the room is so quiet we can hear my dad hammering at the cabin outside and the fans whirring in the dining room doorframe.

“We have so much to do,” she says. “We have to select recipes. We have to take time to cut this produce and wrap it so that we will have a shorter preparation time on Friday morning. And if you wanted to go shopping for new clothes—“

“Okay,” I say, taking the bowl of tomatoes she’s holding out to me. “It’s fine. I’ll help in here and he can call Clint to help him with the cabin or I can help him tomorrow. Let’s look at the cookbooks, then.”

She has already pulled several of her cookbooks from the shelf above the oven. The pages of each book are stiff from spilled sauces and flecked with tomato seeds. She has underlined some of the recipes, crossed ingredients off of others. My dad’s favorite recipes are highlighted in yellow. Mine are in green.

“We should select one recipe for each member of our family,” she says. “In this way, everyone will feel equally important.”

“Do you have a list of who’s coming?”

“Uncle Vance claims he has called everyone. Even your cousins Jemson and June are flying down from the Northeast. If I remember correctly, June is a vegetarian. We should try a tofu dish for her. Do you think that would be a good idea?” she asks. “I will write that down. We can make a list for a second trip to the grocery store.”

There’s a window that faces out of the kitchen across the back yard and looks down into Turkeyfoot Creek, which runs along the back edge of the yard and separates us from the back pasture. Pine trees follow the banks across our property in a line leading to the swamp and the land, which used to be planted with stiff cotton plants reaching waist high, is otherwise empty. From this window, my mother used to watch Clint and I when we would come to visit our grandparents. Maybe she was soaping dishes or putting together a casserole or simply leaning, looking out west to where she came from—where she

was born nestled in the soft blue mountains huddled just beyond the horizon. As we prepare for the reunion, sometimes I catch her, her knife waiting for the drop into an onion or her still hands underneath running water. In these moments, I am reminded of the snake my dad and I saw years ago on the banks of the Turkeyfoot. She stands captured in the sunlight bleeding in from the west, her black hair flat and heavy on her shoulders, which sink beneath the weight of her hair.

“Mother,” I say, each time she seems lost out the window.

“Do you know how important this reunion is, Joy?” she asks. “This is the only way to bring the family back together.” Her shoulders come together and her back pulls up as if by a string.

“I know,” I say. To hear her say this, after years of believing that I am the only one who notices that the family is drifting, separating—that we have been floating apart—

“Do you ever wonder, Joy,” she says, perhaps still imaging her mountains forming from the horizon, “what everybody else in the world is doing right now?”

Now that I am home, back from college, I will lie awake in the nights and listen to the hushed rustling of pine trees and the quiet rush of cars on the highway. I will not think of Sherman or of battlefields or of creaking floorboards and or the lonesome chirp of email notifications. When I sleep in my old bedroom tonight, the wind will blow west from the coast and pull itself into the corners of my room and I will sleep without dreaming.

Jessup

I’ve never had nothing that I haven’t had to get for myself. Never a minute of help in my life—a man’s pride can be wrapped up in how much he does himself versus how much he lets other people do for him. There have been people that think they’re helping me, but I never needed them. I can get along.

When I wake up in the master bedroom of my parent’s house, there are robins singing on the porch and I think, well this is just going to be pleasant. Today is my chance to show off what I’ve done with the place and how much nicer I’ve made Turkeyfoot since my parents got sick. Before me, my brother Vance had been helping out our parents now and then, and they had let the cabin go off and rot

and the pasture by the creek had grass that was long enough to hide a dog in—that creek is, by the way, the most important part of the land of all because that’s where the brothers died, and I told Vance that it was like a sin to let the grass grow up over by the creek because that was like letting weeds grow across their graves, but he didn’t listen. No. He just snuck out there on the weekends and sat by himself in cemetery or on banks of the creek and didn’t do anything except stare at God knows what—I couldn’t tell. And he to this day thinks that nobody saw him, coming down all the way from Charlotte to sit and do nothing on our folks’ land when our dad had sure enough hired him to do actual work, but I saw him. I could see plain as day that he was no good for help.

When dad started to get sick, he asked Vance to help him out firstly, I guess because he was the oldest. Vance was obviously not the best choice, seeing as how he let the whole place rot right back into the ground when he was supposed to be seeding or plowing. Our dad had fields for cotton and wanted to put in some soybeans—Vance let those fields seed right back into the native weeds that always wanted to choke out the crops in the first place. But I didn’t hold it against him, no. I didn’t tell him that he had just ruined the place because what good would that’ve done? I’m not one to judge how good or bad a man is with soil.

So it’s been a few years since Dad sent Vance back to Charlotte or maybe Vance just realized that he’d be better off tucking his tail and going back to city life. When Vance went back for whatever reason, Dad brought me and Sable and Joy out to live with them at Turkeyfoot. They were both real sick by then and needed someone to take care of them, so the move worked out nicely for all of us involved. Back then, I had no paying work—employment, as Sable calls it—except helping out my brother Yossar with the digging he does and Sable had nothing to do but plant vegetables knee-deep in sand and never getting them to grow because there wasn’t a single tree or a lick of water on the rental property and the squashes were mostly sun-cooked by the time they were ripe if the raccoons didn’t eat them straight from the vine first. So her vegetables never did bring any money to us like I thought they would and Yossar couldn’t hardly pay me unless more than one of the local folks died in a week because he had Clint doing all of the other digging that I could’ve done. Sable and I were working hard to keep all of it together and

sometimes I reckon Joy brought in the most money from her pizza parlor job in town. Well, that was okay, but Sable was getting frustrated because my plans for making money were all long term and she wanted a safety cushion for us in the short term, and so the move to Turkeyfoot at least put Sable at bay for a little while. At least we get to live rent-free and so we don't complain too much about how the land looked before I could get my hands on it.

But I have a vision—Vance even said once that it seems like a waste to have all this good farmland doing nothing but growing kudzu and sawgrass. When we were kids and then later, when our kids were kids, me and Yossar and Vance, we used to drive to the beach. We took two cars, Vance and his family in one and mine and Yossar and Clint in the other. It's a three hour drive, going slow—the highway isn't really a highway so much as cracked asphalt, two lanes, running through towns that haven't seen anybody new except tourists passing through and buying gas in years. Going from Turkeyfoot, you can watch the land alongside the road without distraction—unpainted wood houses with tree limbs pushing in the roofs, flat fields of tobacco, maybe a washing machine pitched out into a creek. To get to the beach, we had to pass Cowgrove Battle Site on that same road, and it sat there, years on years, with nothing but a sign and a flat stretch of dried grass and people like us driving back and forth to the beach without ever noticing that piece of history on the side of the road. Then, wouldn't you know it, some fellow got this idea to make it a Historical Site, and it got a new sign, bright and green—Cowgrove Battle Historical Site. And wouldn't that just be perfect for any American Battle Site? I remember the year we drove down and Joy saw that new sign. “What's Cowgrove, Dad?” She asked me, always the interested history buff and all, even if she wasn't more than eight or so. And be damned if I didn't know then but I know now—Tarleton's Quarter, double envelopment, the Old Waggoner—ask me any of it. Cowgrove was a Revolutionary War battle, so it was a lot longer ago than Turkeyfoot, which was, obviously, a Civil War battle. But I've been watching the progress there over the years, wondering whether or not everyday folks have an interest in paying money to walk about on an authenticated patch of history. My conclusion is that they indeed do have such an interest. Out at Cowgrove, there are people coming, walking around, and I got to thinking, why not Turkeyfoot?

One year, I went down there by myself—it was Fall, the leaves were orange and coming down on the flat green land, all of Cowgrove looking like a big stretch of pasture with little wooden cabins and canvas tents popping right up out of the ground. The ground itself is downright unfortunate, which is one major difference between Cowgrove and Turkeyfoot—I read a sign they had posted in the welcome center that said before it was a battle site, people used to use that land for keeping their cattle, so it was no wonder the place had such a thick smell. I signed up for the tour group and waited with a bus-full of 8th graders and some last minute beach tourists. We milled around the parking lot until a guy dressed in some kind of Revolutionary War get up came up to lead us around, and already, I thought, okay so this is inefficient—you don't want to make your customers sit around waiting. The tour guy took us around, told us the tents were like the ones General Morgan had for his Continental troops, how there was no underbrush here because the cows used to free-graze this land, and about the young guy Tarleton that Cornwallis sent over to crush up the Carolinas. When the guy talked, he moved his head up and down, so animated, and this purple mole jiggled on top of his bare forehead—I couldn't stop looking at that mole, shaking up there. He gave me an idea about Joy, though, with all his enthusiasm. Plus, she'd have to make a better looking tour guide than he did, which could help bring in any men that might have an interest in the Civil War. Later, he took us to a gift shop set up in one of the cabins. Women dressed in hand-sewn dresses fixed up like the 1780s punched buttons on a cash register and wrapped up T-shirts and coffee mugs into tissue paper. I saw a kid on a chair behind the counter with some kind of hand-held game system and thought right away—something else I could do better than Cowgrove. I wouldn't have any kids breaking the illusion for my guests.

I got to thinking on my way home how they could be making more money than they were—I didn't know what they were making then, of course, but I would be willing to be a dollar to a doughnut that they could be making more. See, the money is in the Civil War battle sites—Gettysburg, Antietam, Vicksburg—and Cowgrove is a Revolutionary War battle site. You just ask anybody which they care more about—rebel soldiers fighting their Yankee brothers, death and treachery and backstabbing and all, or just a bunch of pioneer-types fighting off the Redcoats? And I don't mean to trivialize all those

Continentalists who died fighting for the freedom to live on whichever and wherever patch of land they felt like living on, but the Civil War is just simply more important than the Revolutionary War. Maybe some don't agree. I guess it's a matter of which tyrant is doing the oppressing at which time, but still, there's a clear-cut market for a Civil War battle site, bonafide.

I started making plans for Turkeyfoot based on what I saw that needed improvement over at Cowgrove. I asked Vance for some front money and quit working with Yossar. Sable picked up Joy's job at the pizzeria when Joy left for college, which she complained about each and every night and I would say, it's about sacrifice. It's about the things we have to do that we don't want to do so that we can have the things we want. Me, I stayed on the land and built. I fixed the Jalin cabin, refurbished it with period-furniture and planted a vegetable patch on the side facing our house. Some of the furniture was plywood, screw-together junk, but the point was that it looked period, and one other thing I learned from Cowgrove is that you don't let the tourists touch anything, so they wouldn't ever know anyway. Before Joy came back this year, I had the cabin patched up and practically livable and the vegetables were growing better than Sable's had ever grown over at the rental and Yossar even came over with Clint one weekend and pulled all of the hubcaps and rusted washing machines out of the creek. Over the winter, I had cleared out our front room and put all of the couches in a corner of the sitting room where they could live pushed up against Sable's table and chairs that used to be in the dining room before we put my folks there. In front of the fireplace, I pitched up a countertop, installed a cash register, and set up a bunch of metal racks to hang souvenir T-shirts on. In the spring, I took photographs of the cabin against the creek with the sun coming up behind me every day until one morning the sun blinked on the dewed rooftop and the sky burned orange with the sun heating on the horizon. I took photographs of Turkeyfoot Creek, of the pasture looking so much nicer than that flat stretch of grass over at Cowgrove, and of an old rifle I bought online leaned up on the front steps of the cabin. Sable took these to town and had them made into postcards, which we then set up on the counter top next to the register. All I was missing in the end was a tour guide to start the season in late spring, and I got that, too, now that Joy's come home.

Yesterday, while Joy and Sable were in the kitchen together or out shopping or putting sheets on the beds getting ready for today, I thought about all of the ways you could market a Civil War battle site. For example, you have the school kids market—that's what Cowgrove is working with. You get these schools to pay you a fee for entry, you get yourself a guide (and that don't cost much, really—Joy will work nearly for free), and you get a nice flat parking place for the buses. That's one way, easy. You could also get together a reenactment program—that's where the real money is. You get these Civil War reenactors to come down to your battle site and you pay them to replay whatever battle you claim to have had on your patch of ground, then you can charge folks from Charlotte or the university or one of those history channels (or the same school kids) to come over and watch the battle how it really happened. This is good money, and if you can get enough of those reenactors interested, then you contact a news station and get yourself a little piece of air time.

There's other ways, too. That gift shop, for example. T-shirts for the kids. I'd like to put in a theater in the sitting room when I figure out what to do with the couches from the front room—then I'll stick in a big television with a “this is how it happened as I saw it” interview with a local historian narrating and some actors playing the roles of the Jalins and the Yankees on loop. When Joy was a little girl, she said when she came back from a class trip at Monticello that they had “historic reenactments” from the days when Jefferson was alive. She said they had a bunch of actors doing the things that people would have done around the place at the time Jefferson lived there, and the best part about that is that the actors were nothing more than interested volunteers. Free laborers, just folks that liked to pretend they were part of an era that they weren't really part of. I could get in some milk cows, a flock of chickens, I don't know, maybe a plow horse or some such creature—okay, not cheap to pull off, but another grabber for the beach tourists going by. Sable said, too, that up in the mountains they do frontier settlements for school kids—the basic idea here is that kids show up dressed like kids from the days when Appalachia was a frontier and the school pays you to let them do work like it was the 1800s.

So, is Turkeyfoot ready to really show yet? Well, no, not to the public, but it's ready for the family—in case, that is, anybody wants to invest in their own family history. For example, I've got Joy

for myself this summer, and with her college work on the Civil War and all, she's a great addition to my plans. Also, we have a stack of T-shirts that say, "Welcome—opening year!" I'm sure those will fly off the shelves just as fast as Sable can sell them. All I have left to do now is wait for the family to show up and invest. Not that I want to see my brother Vance, but this is about business—he's the number one guy in the family who could pay for the advertising that'll bring the kids in.

I wanted to call Joy at school and tell her she's already slated as the tour guide, whether she likes it or not, but Sable said not to bother her because she had finals and papers and no time left to talk to her one and only dad. "When family knocks, you open the door," I would've said to her—Joy knows better than to refuse a family member in need.

All plans aside and given that Sable's going to take up the rest of Joy's time this morning if I don't get to her quick, I wait until seven-thirty to quit my daydreaming and bang on the door to Joy's room with the side of a hammer.

"Today's the day," I say to the door. "Up up up."

When I hear her moving around in the room, I go on down the stairs to make a cup of coffee, drinking it while looking out the back windows at all the hard work I've put into that cabin.

"That you, Jessup?"

Which is my father's voice coming through the dining room door I forgot to close.

"Sure enough," I say. "What is it?"

"I'm thirsty," he says. I wonder for a moment if it's not a trick just to get me in the room, but his voice cracks enough that I can believe him. I pour a glass of water from the tap and push past the fan into the dining room.

"Here," I say. "Drink up." And I turn to go on back out and wait for Joy to come down.

"Jessup," he says. "I have bad news. Is your mother awake?"

I look over to her bed. Her eyes are closed and she breathes slow enough for me to think she's probably still asleep, so I tell him she is.

"You're not going to like what I have to say," he says.

“If you’re going to tell me you’re dying, then save the breath and tell me something I don’t know,” I say.

“I’m giving it to Vance.”

“You’re giving what to Vance?” I ask. “You think he deserves it? After all the improvements I’ve made with my own two hands and you’re going to leave it to Vance?”

“Don’t talk to loud, Jessup,” is all he says. “Don’t wake your mother. She’s ill.”

“Don’t you dare,” I say. “You know he doesn’t deserve it like I do.”

“I want Vance to have it. He’s the oldest.”

“So you want to toss me out on the street. You want your own son to starve on the street,” I say. My mother groans and her hands shift around under the sheets.

“Think about this,” he says. “You know it’s the right decision.”

Except it isn’t. Vance would let the land go to absolute rot. Haven’t I taken care of it? Haven’t I made Turkeyfoot something better than it was? I hear Joy coming down the stairs out in the front room.

“You’ll break Joy’s heart, if you do,” I say to my father. “You know she always wanted the house and land. A grandfather breaking his granddaughter’s heart, because that’s what family’s all about, isn’t it?”

“Please,” he says. “You’ll wake your mother.”

I shake my head and hope he sees it—hope he sees that disbelief. And after I’d come out to live here and take care of him. I go out into the front room where Joy is waiting for me, fingering through the T-shirts I’ve got hanging on metal racks.

“I hope your hands are clean,” I say to her. “Don’t you smudge those up.”

“Grandpa’s awake?” she asks. “Is he feeling good enough to be social today?”

“He’ll have to be,” I say. “Sable’s building this whole reunion around him. I’ve got a job for you.”

“What’s that?” she asks.

“It’s out front,” I say. I lift the hammer from my belt and rap the side of it against the wall.

So Joy and I go out with a hammer and I show her my crowing piece of this entire Turkeyfoot project—my sign. I take it down from where I had it leaning on the corner of the porch and we unroll it together.

“It’s something, isn’t it?” I ask her.

“Turkeyfoot Civil War Battle Site,” Joy reads.

It’s a big white sign I had made special at a copy shop with grommets and a screen printer and shiny black lettering. At the bottom underneath the lettering, there’s an arrow that will point to my driveway. I hand Joy my side of the the sign and pick up a couple of wooden posts to tie the sign to.

“I wanted to get one of those green signs like Cowgrove has,” I say. “But turns out you have to get credited for that first.”

“Accredited,” she says. “By whom?”

“Who else. The government.”

We get down into the front yard and I set the posts so that all we have to do is attach the grommets with nails and hammer the posts into the ground. Joy holds the sign while I whack the posts into the ground except I can’t make them stand straight on account of the soil having too much sand in it. So Joy rolls the sign up and lays it down and holds the posts still, all the while each time I whack, Joy says ouch gets splinters in her hands.

“Hang on,” I say to her. “Don’t give up now.”

And boy—when we get those posts in and nail the grommets to the wood, the white on that sign is so clean and looks so good, it would like to blind you if you looked at it straight on. I tell Joy, I say to her to never forget this moment. Now we are somebody’s—now the Jalins are going to be remembered.

“This is big time,” I say.

“When do we open?” she asks. She’s talking and grinning at the same time, and I would be willing to bet she’s about as excited to get the battle site off the ground as I am.

“Today, we get funds. When we can get enough to advertise, then we’ll really be in business.”

“But we might as well be open before that,” she says. “I could give tours as soon as you tell me what you want me to say.”

My daughter, she’s always been a good girl.

Clint

My dad would say, “Clint, what are you doing here so early?”

To which I wouldn’t even answer. I would smile and nod and push past him into his house so I could get a cup of coffee that was usually not even brewed yet.

Then I’d get my cup of coffee or I’d brew it, either way, and I would say to him, “Any calls yet?”

“At seven-thirty?” he would ask.

“There’s a blight, you know,” I would remind him. “Time is money, you always say. If I’m not ready and available to bury all those horses, who knows who could step up and take that market from us.”

Because this was nearly every morning since the spotted horse. I even began to think how nice it would be if just one more of her friend’s horses would die so that I could see her hair, so black falling in her face that it was just exactly purple, like bootblack, like the shiny topside of a water moccasin drifting across a creek. Anna has a number of horses, and what with the blight on, I figure it’s just an issue of time before one dies again. I can hope—there’ve already been four since then.

This morning, coming in a little late at eight-fifteen, my dad answers the door and says, “You got one.”

“Where?” I ask. “Dogwood?”

“Same farm,” he says. “Getting hit hard.”

But there were other farms hit, too. When I went out for the third horse, Anna had a vet out there. I listened in when that vet told her he thought it had to do with parasites. Something in the soil or from neighboring horses latching into their spines and paralyzing their hind quarters before taking their brains. There was an off chance, he told her, that opossums might be the problem. He thought maybe she should send him with a body so he could do a necropsy, but she was set on having them all buried together.

“Hey,” my dad says as I start to go brew up some coffee. “You’ve got to be at the reunion today. Don’t forget. Your aunt says it’s for the grandparents. One O’clock.”

So I don’t even brew coffee. I just get in the backhoe and go over.

Driving the backhoe up the along the fence line to where Anna’s been burying the horses, I can just make out a series of grey blobs hanging from the white fencing. Up close I can see those blobs are the bodies of opossums—probably close to thirty of them. I get to a stand of pines where I’ve been parking the backhoe and Trinnie—black hair just like the current of a river as she walks—comes up to meet me. Beyond, Anna leans on the fencing with a shotgun in her hand.

“What’s with the opossums?” I ask Trinnie.

“She thinks it’s them.”

Anna has tied their grey bodies upside down by their naked tails to the top most fence rail. Their hands, like the padded palms of babies, seem to reach out to the wooded area beyond the fence line. They hang like mobiles or kid’s toys.

“Why’d she tie them up?” I ask.

“She says she’s setting an example for the rest of them not to come on the property,” Trinnie says. “I told her to just get a dog.”

“Can’t say I don’t agree,” I say. “How are you? Is your mother feeling better?”

We have been talking on and off about her mother in New Jersey. She’s dealing with a cold that won’t go away.

“She acts like she’s dying,” Trinnie says. “I talked to the doctor yesterday and he says she’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with her but that cold.”

“You never know. My grandparents started off like that, too—then we found out they had lung cancer.”

“How awful that they died that way—at the same time?”

“They aren’t dead yet,” I say. “Maybe you could come and meet them sometime.”

She gives me a look stuck somewhere between surprise and possibility.

“The horse is over here,” she says. We across a pasture near the dogwoods where a chestnut horse is sprawled out like it’s running parallel to the ground.

“And it’s dead already?” I ask. Anna hasn’t come over with us. She leans against the fence, staring off at the stand of pine trees, just waiting for another opossum to crawl out from the woods.

Trinnie nods, so I get the backhoe and dig the hole alongside the other fresh mounds of dirt.

The horse is a short distance to the hole, because, Trinnie says, Anna didn’t want any more of them to get scuffed up on their way to the grave. I hook up the chains and drag its body over and into the hole. Anna tosses objects into the horse’s grave—alfalfa, blue ribbons, carrots, medals, blankets. I stand next to Trinnie on the opposite side of the hole and wait for Anna to say her goodbyes. Trinnie’s hands touch me sudden, wandering across my back. I look down at the horse in the grave just in case she’d stop if I looked at her instead.

After Anna goes to check on her remaining horses and I get the chestnut buried, Trinnie meets me at the fence line. The sun tilts toward the middle of the sky. I remind myself that the reunion starts at one.

“She’s taking it hard,” Trinnie says.

“I don’t know if there’s an easy way to take it,” I say. “She only has a few left.”

“Five,” Trinnie tells me. “At least they’re insured. She could buy more in the long run.”

“I want to see you again,” I say—it comes out so fast I surprise even myself.

“More of them will likely get it,” she says. “I’m sure you’ll have more graves to dig.”

“No,” I say. “I mean outside of digging.”

“Why do you want to see me?” she asks.

“Can I invite you to my family reunion today? It’s short notice. You probably couldn’t come.”

“Okay,” she says.

“Plus I don’t know where you live. But my grandparents will be there, so you could at least meet them. Maybe you could talk to them and ask if what your mom has is like what they first sounded like. I don’t know. I can just—“

“Okay,” she says again. This time I get it.

“It’s at one,” I say. Just in case she wouldn’t have enough time.

“Two hours?”

“I’ll pick you up,” I say. I begin to notice red soil in the creases of my skin, wood shavings in my shirt pockets, and the mud clots on my shoes. I begin to imagine me picking her up in a house with white carpets on a paved street with flowering trees in the yard. I wonder—do the men in New Jersey ever have mud in their shoes?

“No,” she says. “Tell me where to meet you. Where do you live?”

And that’s not any better for me to imagine. I can tell her my dad’s house out past Turkeyfoot on the gravel road or I can send her to my apartment above the pizza store in town.

“There’s a place,” I say. “Just as you get off the highway that goes to town. It used to be a peach orchard and you could buy crates of peaches there. Do you know it?”

“You want me to meet you at an abandoned peach orchard?”

“It’s off the highway,” I say. “You can’t miss it from the road.”

She looks at me, her eyes going up and down from my feet to head. I wonder if the men in New Jersey ever have mud on their jeans and on their shoes. If I pulled up my fingernails, they’d likely have dirt underneath them, too.

“Alright,” she says. “Okay. What time should I be there?”

“We can be a little late,” I say. “I’ll meet you at twelve forty-five.”

“I’ll see you then,” she says.

New Jersey, I think. Who would’ve ever thought. Because when I imagine it, I think like a bird and the houses go past under me and I can see the squares of farmland cut out of the landscape and the

circles of shiny cities and the cars going up and down from here to New Jersey like red ants in the yard. I think of all the rivers I would have to cross to get from here to there.

Sable

As my daughter and I prepare the meals for the reunion, I am surprised to see her echo my movements. When I bring down my knife on a grape tomato, I see out of the corner of my eye that she is planning her chop so that her knife also falls onto the skin of her tomato at the same time. Together, these knives are like battle drums marching across our kitchen, or like a heartbeat—slow moving and identical.

When I put down my knife, I see that Joy does the same. She is trying to make herself frown so that she does not smile—I believe she wants me to believe that this is all coincidence. As if she wants me to see how similar we are, we mother and daughter. I am flattered. Perhaps I am more confused. I had expected her to be angry that I had not called her. I had also hoped that she would not want to come home at all, but here she is in my kitchen, enjoying family time.

“Dad is supposed to rake outside, right?” she says to me. “Or isn’t he supposed to mow the grass? He’s reading the paper. Did you know that?”

My mother taught me to expect a helpful man, but this is not what I expect from Jessup. I cannot think of a more appropriate activity for him. There is not one activity that I trust him to do well for this reunion. I am not pretending that he cares about family time. I am not fooled when Jessup says he would like the family to see their history in action—this reunion is for the grandparents. This is my goodbye present to them.

“He is likely tired,” I say. “He has spent so much time on that cabin.”

“Dad, don’t you always say that family takes team?” Joy yells to him in the other room. “Family takes picking up where others left off?”

“Earthquakes in Chile. Congressional Stalemate on Tax Reform. Five Stars for Leo Today,” my husband yells back to her. I wonder if she is satisfied with her answer. I wonder why she does not expect such an answer at this point in her life.

I look at Joy as I mix garlic and onions together with a spoon. She is chopping too fast and the insides of the tomatoes are squishing out. I find that I have been chopping fast, too, and I am suddenly disappointed in myself for setting a poor example for Joy. The tomato skins are wrinkled and this makes for ugly salad. It is my sister-in-law, Brigget, that likes tomatoes, and so I do not worry too much that her salad will be ugly.

“You are chopping the tomatoes into ugly old faces, Joy,” I say. “That is too fast, you know.”

“Okay, but you want me to find chairs, too? I was trying to cut faster,” she says to me, “so that I could get the chairs before people start arriving. It’s, what, eleven?” She does not look at me when she speaks and her wrist flicks the knife faster into the tomatoes. Now some of the juices and seeds fly up and stick to her white sleeves so that her arms are flecked with little ladybug-tomato spots. Then she uses her hand to push her bangs out of her face. We are certainly in need of chairs for our relatives.

“If this is to be a success, then the chairs will feature a prominent role, Joy. They would not make us stand if we were at their houses.”

There are many other mothers in this world who have also discovered the dangers of spending too much alone time with their grown daughters. I take deep breaths and remind myself that to be a mother is to have conflict with your daughter. I believe this to be simply unavoidable.

“Do you think maybe we don’t need chairs?”

Joy asks this instead of saying, yes, I am chopping too fast or, of course the chairs are important or, I will slow down and chop so that the tomatoes are even and firm. Then she says:

“We haven’t seen some of them for years. There hasn’t been an occasion for them to make us stand.”

“*Has not*, Joy,” I say. “There *has not* been an occasion.”

It is important that one uses one’s mouth to enunciate one’s words. Too many of Jessup’s people—even my own daughter—do not enunciate. How am I to know what they mean when they speak? It is unnatural, yes, but this is the way in which Jessup’s family has taught Joy to speak. If the human voice is meant to communicate thought, then I might accuse Jessup’s family of being incapable of

thought. They, Jessup's relatives, say things like, "Ain't it right time for them clouds to c'm up" or "I bin finishen' that armerar since last Teusdee." They wear their accents like bandanas around their necks, cinched too tight at the throat so that their words catch in their mouths, mixing with saliva and spitting out over their teeth.

"Okay," Joy says. She will not change nor speak clearly—I have been trying to correct her slang since she came home two days ago. I had hoped that education would have corrected her speech for me.

I can still hear Jessup in the other room and with one subtle rustle of his newspaper, I am suddenly as frustrated with him as I imagine Joy to be. Why can he not help us? Why does he have to make certain things more difficult than they have to be? I have to think *calm calmmmmm calm* and as long as Jessup does not speak right now, I think I can manage—I think I can remember good things like our first date, the peach orchard, with both of us laughing and peach juice running thickly down our chins and our fingers clasped together and our skin sticking and how we were like small children with popsicles melting in our hands. I think of the peaches and the hot smell of sun-baked peach fuzz in baskets and I think I can manage so that I am calm and not just saying that I am calm. Outside, the wind is pushing the pines toward the ocean—because that would be just what we need, rain before the reunion. Then we would have no outdoors activities. We would all be in the house, here and there under each other's feet.

"I should think we should not make them stand," I say to Joy. "We will have to simply find twenty or so chairs for them to sit on."

"Right. Like the ones that used to be around the dining room table when we still used the dining room for its intended purpose," Joy says.

"We had nowhere else to put them. We had to make considerations for their health and their proximity to the washroom and the kitchen. They used to be mobile and your grandfather had an easier time moving about if he were sleeping in the dining room."

"Okay," Joy says. She is not listening. Instead, she starts the dishes. I have to wonder, where am I to find twenty chairs? I keep watching outside of the window to see if thunderclouds are forming. The plastic cover for the grill billows. Sometimes that means rain. I think about asking Joy if she has seen the

weather forecast but how could she have seen it when she has been arguing beside me in the kitchen for all of this time? Maybe Joy does not realize how important it is to make this reunion perfect. Maybe she does not want to think about what will happen if this reunion does not go well—how her grandparents will die remembering their family in conflict with itself. I have my complaints, but family is family and Jessup belongs to me, which means that I belong to his family and they are as much mine now as they are Joy's and Jessup's. Besides, I have to consider how poorly we would look in the eyes of the community—a family split apart and isolated into little clumps scattered across the state—and what would this do for the business Jessup has started?

Joy rubs the sponge against the mixing bowls while the pine trees beyond the window bend eastward in the wind. Flat circles turn the red paint dark on the porch railing and the rain comes down, twisting in the wind. Joy has her lips pulled together in a straight line and I know she is annoyed with me because this is the same thing that I do with my lips when I am annoyed with her. This simply has to be about the chairs and her inability to finish anything she starts and I want to ask her, well, where does she think people will sit if she does not find these twenty chairs? Except I can predict her answer and I could even have the entire fight in my own mind without ever saying anything out loud to her. She will say, well, they could sit on the edge of the porch or lean on the house or just stand and walk around. And I would say that standing or sitting on parts of the house seems so uncivilized and country-fide. She would tell me that this is not the Ritz-Carlton or a five-star restaurant and that my kitchen is not Zagat-rated and so what if we don't have enough chairs, so what? I will not have an answer to this question, and that is why I will not begin this conversation with her, because a mother cannot win once the grown daughter has decided she knows better than the mother. I have to accept this as part of Joy and as my cross to bear as a mother. Clint has never been this way with me, but perhaps this is because he is not my son in blood.

Rain builds little pools in the yard. I am going to check on the food in the oven, set the table, and make the spare beds. If Joy wishes for us to look like uncivilized countryfolk in the eyes of our relatives, then she can ignore my wishes for her to find the chairs.

Yossar

I wake up last night to bang, bang, bang. Like someone taking his fist to a window pane. I sleep with my windows open when it's warm enough. If it wasn't the third night one right after the other, I might've thought intruder. I might've fished out my shotgun and had a look in the kitchen. But it's that girl. She's back again. I don't know what it is about my pots that she likes so much. Bang, bang, bang. That's how she likes to tell me that I'm not allowed to forget. If Vance and Jessup don't want any part in the remembering, she's going to make sure that at least I won't forget.

My grandmother used to make a coconut cake that her mother used to make. I guess there weren't coconuts around here before that. Jessup and Vance liked to fight in the backyard when we were all kids. That's when my grandmother lived with us at Turkeyfoot. She would say, don't you get involved, Yossar. Fighting doesn't do anybody any good. She said, let me teach you to make a cake instead. She said, I'll sift the flour and you can grate the coconut. She said, you can lick the bowl if you don't tell your brothers. When she died, I dug the hole that she went in. I could go out and visit her right now if I wanted to because she's in the back yard at Turkeyfoot. Vance bought her a tombstone with mica in it so she is like glitter when the sun comes down.

My grandmother was dead when I needed her. That was when me and Jessup and Vance were in our twenties. I made pretend that she would say to look to God. I tried to look and I couldn't find him. Maybe she would've said something else. Maybe she would've said what we did was a sin. That wouldn't of been fair of her to say. What if I didn't mean for it to happen. You could've done more and you know it, she would've said to that. That's what that girl keeps trying to tell you when she wakes you up with that bang, bang, bang.

Those bangs make me wake up looking hollow. I get black under my eyes and my skin looks like it might want to fall off my bones. I guess this is part of the paying for it, too. I guess she wants me to see how she might look in the ground. I used to try to sneak flowers out onto her grave when I had jobs digging in her cemetery. I tried daisies and roses and tulips, once. The other folks had put flowers down,

too. The front of her stone was just exactly like a garden but none of the plants was growing. I wonder if she still comes to bang their pots and pans.

So I take out pots and pans and set about that coconut cake. Since Clint's gone for a few hours and I'm by myself, I spin on my heels and pluck an egg out of the refrigerator—just like my grandmother might do. I hold the flour bag high and move it up and down so the powder shakes out even into the measurer. Then sugar in a bowl. Milk. A bag of coconut shavings—my grandmother would rather I buy a whole coconut. Clint likes coconut cake. So does my sister-in-law, Sable. She asked me to make the cake for the reunion because nobody else knows how, not since my grandmother died. I know how to separate eggs, whites from yolk, so I do that and keep them in separate bowls. My grandmother said you have to fold those whites in later or the batter gets too wet.

When I get the batter mixed up and in the oven, I have nothing to do but sit by myself in the kitchen and wait. You get used to the sounds of an empty house. It gets to a point that it's like the house is talking to you. There's the wind under the door. That bathroom sink drips. Water rolls along in the pipes. A man came and fixed my furnace once—he said he had a ghost in his house that he could hear ironing clothes and singing along with a radio. He said she lived up in his attic. My ghost, she never bangs the pots and pans when I'm here to see it. Once I thought I heard her footsteps on the stairs and thought she might actually come up to see me, but it was just Clint. I forgot I had given him a key.

Joy

I have heard my dad say that you can't get out of family even if you want to—that no action will go unforgiven by a member of our family. Exceptions would be made, of course, for the killing of one family member by another family member or perhaps for the spreading of family secrets, especially if the secrets could find a family member in trouble with the law. Incest would of course be another unforgivable action, as is the stealing of money, and specifically money because the stealing of inherited goods tends to be forgiven on a case by case basis. For example, when my great-grandfather died, he left a shotgun he had owned as a child in the possession of my Uncle Vance. Because my Uncle Vance had

never even gone hunting with his grandfather and my father had, my father took the shotgun out of the Turkeyfoot attic before Vance could come and claim it. My father said that in his grandfather's final months, he was a confused and bitter dying man. Before that, he said that my grandfather even taught him how to shoot with that gun, that they would spend hours popping squirrels out of the pine trees in the back pasture. In a case like this, I think it's only reasonable that my father keep the gun because of the memories attached to it, and we persuaded Vance to agree. If my dad, say, lays a claim to my grandfather's property before he tells us who he plans on willing it to, which he has not done yet, that could be an unforgivable offense. Or if I had taken my Uncle Vance's money for college and not planned on completing my degree—that could be the unforgivable offense of stealing money. As it is, my grandparents take shallow breaths and speak few words. My dad says he is still waiting to hear his father's final verdict—that verdict would be who gets the land.

And what is family without land? Without land, a family lacks origin, it lacks setting—context. Without land, a family is not so different from an orphan—I think of Sherman, whose father died and left his mother with eleven children and no inheritance. Are we not partially defined by the soil from which we are carved out of the landscape? After giving our names, is not the second question we answer to a stranger that expected query—where are you from? When I pass that open door to the dining room, I pause and listen for movement in the covers, thinking if I hear them awake, I will be brave enough to go in and explain what owning the land would mean to my dad. If I could only bring myself to interfere, I would tell my grandfather that there is no better choice—that my dad would develop the land and give it something more than crops. Because if my parents don't get the inheritance, then where will they live?

The family is supposed to come at noon (and this includes my cousins, uncles, great aunts, all of their dogs and half-related children that become cousins, that are lumped into the cousin category for lack of better associations). That way we only have to feed one meal—early dinner, so to speak—and we only have to find a place for those who live far away to sleep. When I was a child, my grandmother would throw blankets, quilts, down comforters, and extra pillows onto the living room floor, the coffee table and couches pushed to cotton-colored walls, and everyone who wished to stay would knot together on that

floor, curled into one another for warmth against the heat-sucking hardwood. We were children spiraled in the center, some younger adults nooked around us, and dogs—mostly my grandfather’s that we had let in to the house—curled like flower buds on the hips of the grown-ups. My mother finds this practice uncivilized. She believes guests belong in beds, even children. She has leaned cots against the living room walls next to the folding chairs I had to track down yesterday.

The family that usually comes to these reunions is that of my dad. My mother’s family came down from the mountains for a few years, but I guess the drive got too long and the mountain highways got too dangerous—my mother says they plan on coming this year, however. She says if it wasn’t for Christmas cards, she’d have forgotten what her sisters looked like.

Aberdeen County is mostly planted land—cotton, tobacco, some soy—and the land that isn’t planted is eaten up by kudzu and pine trees. There’s a railroad, some gas stations, and a number of rotted, roof caved shacks, but otherwise, the only signs of civilization come from the cars that go in and out of the County on the way east to the beaches. Reunions are like outlets, reminders that we are not couched apart in yellow pine groves and separated by swamp waters. Some people go to churches if they want to see their neighbors. I can think of only one other occurrence that brings the County together, and that is on the occasions when the train derails. The train that runs through the County carries toxic chemicals—acids, pesticides, corrosive metals—and there are no stops in the tri-county area to slow it. My mother used to tell me that it only derailed when children put pennies on the tracks, but I think she said that just to keep us out of the railroad beds. I remember a cold night, frost catching star light on the iron tracks—my mother collecting Clint and I, just children, in a quilt, hustling us into the car. My father, my uncle, in the front seat driving against the moon in their eyes—so bright then like a lamp suddenly flashing on from the darkness. Then the train: a hulking iron snake chopped, as if by shovel, by cold, severing metal. The cars dumped hot acid on the ground, friction from the tracks catching hungry liquids on fire, some cars pushed as if by a child’s hands into the soil off the tracks. The rest of the County parked alongside us, in battered dark sedans and trucks, wrapped in blankets and jackets against the cold—my father waiving to a neighbor in the car beside us, my mother saying, “My God, my God, my God.” We watched

the houses along the tracks burn up with liquid, our neighbors with their hands over their mouths, hushed in the hot explosion of frosted houses.

At noon from the porch at Turkeyfoot, I can hear that same train blowing through the town several miles away—far enough to not rattle the windows of our houses, but something in the struggled sigh of the whistle brought up that night the train derailed. I remember, suddenly, my mother getting out of our car to talk to my Aunt Brigget about a casserole dish—the creased smile on her face that I could just see through the burning of our County neighbors’ houses. And although these were the houses of people we knew, we were insulated with sheer body mass—there were more of us without a house burning than there were with a house burning, and those numbers felt like family, like protection, and my father turned to my Uncle Vance, his teeth caught in the glow of that same fire, saying, “At least it wasn’t any of ours.”

I like to say, the more the merrier—other than at town disasters and reunions, when else would we get to see the family? Most of my relatives spend their lives indoors, watching TV or playing video games or filing paperwork in a concrete office building. They say things like that it’s too hot to be out in the summer, or too muggy or the wind is blowing too much. When I’m at school, I take my research onto the patio at the library, just to imagine what a cavalry might sound like if the pine trees are there to muffle the hoof beats. It’s not that bad—the outdoors—if they would try it. You find out how much heat you can tolerate when you pretend that you don’t have air conditioning. It’s the air conditioning that’s pulling us apart, if you ask me. People used to have porches on the front of their house instead of a garage, and that’s where you could sit and get the news or talk about the welfare of your friends and family. My parent’s house still has a porch in front—but does anyone sit on it except for me? Sometimes I wait for hours for someone to come by, counting the red hawks diving into the fields across the road.

I watch for the family to come, resting my feet on the railing of the porch. In the front yard, my dad pulls a rake across the longish brown grass. He has neglected to water for the two weeks when he was remodeling the walls in the cabin and I know he wouldn’t say it, but there is some shame for him in the color of the grass. He had made a pile of leaves earlier, but the wind took it down and now, last year’s

leaves are spread as before the raking. He seems to have a schedule: rake for a few minutes, stop—look at the road, at the tree, at the sign, brush his hands on his jeans, check his nails, bite off the side of his nails, look back at the yard, at all of the leaves, siiiiiiiggggghhh, then rake.

I check my watch, knowing before I look that it's nearly one. I have counted ten red hawk dives since the train whistle. Mom has all of the food we had made out and hot, and cold, inside the house. Together, we cut bread slices into triangles and arranged them on a plate like tea sandwiches. We scooped serving spoons with little foxes on the handles into the wet dishes. I took the potato chips out of the bags and dumped them into serving bowls so that the family wouldn't get salt and chip grease on their hands. This was all by design, all to make things easier for the family. When we finished in the kitchen, I held each of my grandparents by their armpits while she changed my grandmother into a blue dress and my grandfather into grey sweats. My mother keeps saying how she hasn't confirmed anything with Vance, so she doesn't know who's coming and who isn't. She worries that no one will come and that my grandparents will die without getting to say goodbye to the family. She worries that people have forgotten or had other plans or simply don't feel attached or obligated or interested any more.

My dad continues to rake the leaves into little piles. The wind comes down and catches the leaves so that each finished pile blows itself apart before he can get a leaf bag over to it. At one point, a leaf bag rustles in one hand and with his rake in the other, he tries to push leaves that twist up from the earth in little puffs of wind into the leaf bag.

“Do you think it would trouble you too much to bring a hand down here and help out?” he asks.

“It's a losing battle,” I say, but I get up anyway and put a rock on some pages I've been reading about Sherman. This article discusses the later life of Sherman. Joe Johnston, our rebel leader, was a bareheaded pallbearer at Sherman's funeral, and that following that endeavor, Johnston caught pneumonia and died.

“I'd like to get these leaves put up before Vance gets here, at least,” he says. “He's usually late. That drive from Charlotte.”

“I think the place looks nice either way,” I say. He hands me the leaf bag and I hold it down close to the ground while he nudges leaves into it with the front end of the rake.

“You could guess what I think about Vance’s opinion,” he says.

“He won’t get the land,” I say. “Grandpa has to see that Vance doesn’t take an interest in it like you do.”

“That still leaves Yossar,” he says. “Maybe he’ll want to give the land to Yossar.”

“You know he won’t,” I say. “You’re the best choice.”

“I’ve got to get him to finalize his decision,” my dad says. “He keeps putting it off.”

My dad turns and looks up the road—I look, too. We watch as a truck rolls down, slowing at each pothole before stopping on the shoulder of the road. Those potholes will have to be filled—something else to do before we get too much traffic coming in. My dad leans on the rake, facing the truck. Leaves blow up around his legs.

My Uncle Yossar gets out of the truck with a coconut cake in one hand and begins to hobble on his shorter leg, pitching to the right as he struggles on the loose soil. He had an accident with a backhoe some years ago, my father says—the backhoe tipped heavily against the grade of a grave, and the machine kicked sideways as it slid backwards. My uncle was caught between the bars of the machine’s cage and a casket at the bottom of the grave for the entire night, his leg wedged and broken and tangled into the mess of yellow metal. Nobody noticed until an old woman who had gone out to visit her dead husband’s grave heard him yelling the next morning, so the story goes.

Clint gets out of the other side of the truck and leans his seat forward to let someone in the back out. His face has a tendency to look unscrubbed, rough—like he might roll it in loose dirt each morning. I figure that will bring about some comments from my mother, but I can see from here that he has at least put on a clean shirt. Clint reaches into the truck and pulls out an unfamiliar woman—black hair, thick arms—she is built like a potato with legs, lumpy, and hawkish eyes that jut out wide on her face. She has on black jeans and a blue button down shirt, like she might have come from church on her way to the nightclub, or at least like she doesn’t spend too much time worrying what people think about her outfits.

The men stand around shaking hands, nodding and staring at my father's rake as though they haven't just seen each other yesterday, as though there isn't this potato-shaped woman standing next to my cousin on the street. I try to look at her while looking like I'm searching for more cars down the road, thinking how if I accidentally catch her eyes, I will have to say something first.

"What do you think you all are doing?" my mother calls down from the porch. The men stop nodding and turn to face her. Clint has his arm around the woman but I still try to not look at her face—she hasn't said anything to me, either.

"Already, you are late, and now, you are just letting the food get colder," my mother yells. My watch says one-fifteen.

My dad leans the rake against the tree and follows Yossar as he comes up the yard. Clint walks over to me, herding the woman ahead of him with the nook of his arm.

"Joy!" he says, pulling me up and squeezing his arms around me. His face scratches my cheeks—his stubble is cowboyish, overgrown. He smells like farm, like outside with hints of gasoline so that I could tell his morning was spent on the backhoe, digging holes, filling them. I wish he would shave more often and I wonder what this woman thinks of his smell.

"My most missed cousin," I say. His shirt has a different, thick smell—maybe perfume, something floral I expect from gigglers, late-night dancers, and fashion-followers. "I just saw you yesterday. Did you miss me that much?"

I wonder if he went to the bars to find this woman last night, just so maybe the family will think he's on track to having a new family. I can picture him talking to her, leaning so close that his chest bumps her wrists as they sit and talk about recent movies or how much they both like dogs. At the end of the night, did he press her between his arms, squeeze her, and did she smell the gasoline and wonder about his profession or wonder what his apartment looked like on the inside—country home style or modern, would she wonder? Did she get to see his apartment? He told me once he likes to tell women that he's a business entrepreneur involved with cardboard manufacturing management—they never ask him to prove it, even though this is not what he does.

“I want you to meet Trinnie,” he says. The lumpy woman jumps forward, excited as a dog might be and just as pushy. She doesn’t wait for me to extend my hand to the void between us and instead uses both of her rough, mannish palms to completely cover the hand I hold at my side. She has thick black hair on her arms that seems to billow in the wind caused by her enthusiastic shaking.

“Trinnie, this is my favorite cousin—Joy,” Clint says.

“I’ve heard so much,” Trinnie say. I wonder—what could she have heard in only a day?

“That’s great,” I say. “Let’s go in before we get summoned a second time.”

I let them walk in front of me, watching her bump her hips just slightly into Clint, what with them giggling and his arm moving up and down on her shoulder. I cut my eyes and try to think of her in the dark lights of a bar, what she might look like then. My mother waits for us on the porch, her arms flagged out from her hips. Clint moves up to her, and his arms engulf her small frame.

“Aunt Sable! You are as pretty as a cantaloupe! As pretty as a cactus! No, no—you are as pretty as a sand dune in the breeze after a hurricane!” His arms pull her in. She makes a tight face over Clint’s shoulder, one arm at her side, the other flat on his shoulder blade. If you could trace a line from her eyes, they would land square on Trinnie, too. I imagine how we must have made the same look and right away, I know what she was thinking.

“You smell like a bar. Your face is dirty,” she says. “Is that mud? Would it be so much to ask for a clean face for the only time in a year you see so many of your relatives? And who is this? Who did you bring?”

“Aunt Sable, this is Trinnie,” he says.

Trinnie bounds up the stairs and takes my mother’s hand the same way she took mine. My mother holds the coconut cake in one had while Trinnie grasps her other.

“So what are we eating? What did you girls cook?” Clint opens the screen door, walks in. Behind him, my mother watches Clint’s feet—his shoes leave clumps that follow his steps to the kitchen. She leans and picks the clumps of mud from her carpet, hunched as she follows him.

Inside the house, I find my dad standing alone in front of the picture window, his face pointed down the road again. He doesn't have to say it—he is trying to manifest his family, to force them into cars that would then drive down the road and park in front of the house.

“He could've parked in the driveway,” my dad says to the window panes. He crosses his arms on top of his stomach. “No sense in being on the road when that's where the rest of the family is going to park.”

“They'll find a place,” I say. “There's plenty of room.”

“It's one-fifteen,” he says. “When did Vance tell your mother everyone was coming?”

“One,” I say. “But it's an approximation. There's so much time for them to still come.”

I stand next to him at the window until my mother's voice echoes in from the kitchen.

“Hey—no food yet! We wait for the rest of the family and eat like people are supposed to eat—
together!”

My dad and I wander into the kitchen after her voice. My mother carries plates, bowls, and platters from the kitchen island to the table, muttering about which spoon should go where and whether or not the dark meat of the turkey should even be placed out on the table space since it is not the popular color of meat for sandwiches.

“I am expecting another guest at any minute,” she says. Her arms carry a bowl of baked beans to the table.

“Sit down and wait,” my dad says.

“And have them come without any of the food set out? I should think not.”

“You don't know,” he says. “You're the one willing to count on Vance to actually do all the inviting.”

“None of that,” she says. “Go and get your parents. You can put them on the porch.”

“Wellup,” he starts.

“Go,” she says, and he does. Clint goes with him and they come back with my grandfather propped over both of their shoulders. In the light of the kitchen, my grandfather's face has collapsed into

black hollows. His eyes are like tobacco leaves—yellowed and menaced with brownish spots—and his uncombed hair puffs out on his head like cotton left behind on the branches in the winter. Clint and my dad set him down into a chair pulled out from the table and go back to get my grandmother. He stares at nothing, maybe at all of us or he could be looking out the back door.

“Grandpa,” my mother says. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Where’s Vance?” he asks. “It’s bright.”

“He’s coming,” I say.

Yossar pulls a curtain across half of the sliding door and the room shades. Trinnie leans on the island and looks down the hall to where Clint is bringing in my grandmother. She has the same black sunken cheeks and the flicker of life has gone out of her eyes so that she gazes at me with the flatness of a doll.

“How do you feel?” I ask her. Her neck gives out and her head falls against my dad’s shoulder as he sets her in a chair next to my grandfather.

“Do you want to sit outside?” my mother asks them. My grandmother has to be held up at her armpits. Her mouth hangs slack and my mother hands me a napkin to wipe her chin.

“It’s bright,” my grandfather says.

“I think the warm air would be nice for you,” my mother says. “Jessup, go ahead and carry them both outside. The kids can keep them company until everyone else arrives.”

My grandmother is now asleep on my shoulder. I hold the napkin below her mouth so that I can keep my shirt dry. A car cracks over the gravel outside and I shake my grandmother’s leg—just enough to waken her. Her bones could snap in my hands.

Jessup

Wouldn’t you know it, just as soon as I hook my arms underneath my dad’s armpits, up pulls cousin Ollie and his wife, Julli, and their kids are practically falling out of their car and pushing each other on the shoulders and running up the front steps making so much noise you’d think the world was

coming to an end. Next thing we know, cars are crawling up on the gravel and then comes Violet, Crenshaw, Uncle Thomas, Uncle Chuck—Chuck’s girlfriend, Sandi that I’ve never met before. Then my niece and nephew, Jemson and June, come on with a couple more bags of potato chips and June has a bag of trail mix she’s nibbling on because, she says, she hasn’t even been off the airplane for long enough to not be hungry. I can list them off on my hand as they come in—there’s Amstead and Jones and then a fellow comes in I’ve never seen before and he walks on by to my cousin Richard and they shake hands, so I guess he belongs, too. The rest of the family comes in over the span of an hour—the women carrying plastic covered dishes, kids with stained T-shirts and foamy footballs, the rest of the men coming in with bare hands, slapping shoulders and first thing getting a drink—I know that because I’m the one standing out on the back porch with a cooler and a cold one, handing those out to any man or boy that comes by and at least seems old enough to drive. You got to get them a little liquored up, at least. The women go on straight to Sable, Joy, and that girl of Clint’s that doesn’t say much in the kitchen while the men stand in a half circle around me at the grill, just exactly as if I was my dad working the grill. Sable hassles me enough to get Clint to help me set out my parents on the back porch, so we take them over and lay them out on lawn chairs, like they were getting a tan or some such thing. The younger kids climb through the pasture grass so tall that every once in awhile, we get so we can’t see them if they go to rolling on the ground. And it gets to where with all the laughing and joking telling and story repeating, when Vance comes up behind me and taps me on the shoulder, I don’t even care that he’s the last son-of-a-bitch to show up. What I mean is, everybody else is already here, and besides, before I feel his tap on my shoulder, I know he’s showed because I hear Brigget squealing like she might be related to the screen door out front.

“It’s a good showing,” he says. As if we’ve been close as peas and carrots all along.

“I guess,” I say. “Nice of you to show up. You know, Dad’s been asking for you all day.”

“Where is he?”

“Waiting on your arrival,” I say. “So I’d guess he’s disappointed that you’re late.”

“Traffic,” is all he says.

“Three hours of it? Even Sable’s upset,” I say, even though I don’t think she is. I just say it to get him riled up. “She said she was counting on you.”

“She said that?” he asks, just under his breath like someone will hear him and care about it.

“Oh boy,” I say. “Oh boy, she did. She says she just can’t count on you anymore.”

“I didn’t mean to put her off,” he says. Just like a little boy in trouble with his mother. “I should go and apologize.”

“No sense now,” I say.

Sable sticks her head out through the sliding door and yells that she’s got food on. I flip a few patties of hamburger and plate up some that are finished. Around me and Vance, little kids push up and grab the patties straight off the platter and walk off eating without plates.

“You kids,” Vance says. “You kids come back here and get plates.”

They don’t. People are coming in and out of the house. We have a picnic table set up down the in the backyard and the porch empties out as folks go down to sit. Once I get about everybody plated up and send Vance over to our parents with a plate for them to share, I go on down and squeeze in at the table. Vance comes down a minute or two later, and that’s everybody—all of us pushed into the table real tight and some folks sitting on the steps behind us.

“Wellup,” I say to the table. “What do you all think of the improvements?”

There are nods. Some grunts, but they are grunts of approval.

“If any of you want to get a hand in this business, then now is your time,” I say. “Don’t put it off another day—this is a cash cow.”

And here we are—a family eating all together and not a one of us fighting when Vance, who must have gotten something caught in his craw when we was taking those plates to our parents says, “Nobody in their right mind would stop at a tourist destination with a crooked sign, Jessup.”

“Excuse me?” I say, wondering where that came from. “What crooked sign might you be referring to?”

“That one out front,” he says. “If you want investors—“

“Then what, Vance?” I say.

And damned if he doesn't wait until all the food is cooked and we are sitting in chairs pushed in so tight around the long table that nobody can hardly push backwards if they want out. And on top of that, he speaks and the whole damn table, all the female, male, and puffy-cheeked kid faces, whip around like he is saying he has a million dollars for each of them.

“I went over to Cowgrove,” he starts up again. “And I don't know if you've noticed, but they have a government-issued National Park sign. One of the brown ones, you know. Have you seen that, Jessup?”

Well, of course I had—I've been going over to Cowgrove for weeks to get ideas on how to make my place better than that one. And I know they've likely been peeking over at Turkeyfoot, too, even though they haven't sent anyone to walk around out here, actively spying, that I know of. So I look right at Joy, for support, and I say:

“Well, I reckon you weren't here to help, were you, Vance? Did you have all those splinters in your hands like Joy here? Show him your hands, Joy.”

The whole family, none of them saying a word. So quiet you can hear the wind flapping the lips of the paper plates against the wood of the table and people smacking bratwursts in their teeth. Joy sets down her hamburger and lifts her palm, as if to say, “Stop.” Her skin is pulled raw from prying out cactus spines she got weeding in the family plot that first day she was home, but Vance doesn't know that—red spots from splinters look just about the same as red spots from cactus spines.

“Well, Jessup, what that brown sign at Cowgrove means is that they government funding. What sort of funding do you have, Jessup? Are we your government funding, Jessup? Tell us, exactly, how do you plan on bringing money in?”

“Vance,” Sable says. “Vance.” Which makes me extra mad, because firstly, I don't need my wife to take my brother's side, and secondly, I don't need my brother stepping on the toes of my potential supporters which also happen to be our relatives.

And Vance doesn't look once at Joy's hands, which she still has held up like two stop signs in front of her.

"Jokes, it's jokes," Yossar says, trying to push his chair back and stand up, but the legs are caught in the legs of Clint's chair and Brigget's chair. He must see it in my face—all that boiling up.

"Go on then, Yossar," I say to him. "Go on inside and make us up another coconut cake, if you don't want to get involved."

"Jessup," Sable says to me this time. "Stop."

"It isn't all that bad, Vance, and if you could remember back to a day when you didn't live on nothing but concrete, then maybe you could remember how the soils gets around here, this being an old beach from when the water was higher in the Mysocene? Plastocene?" I say right at him, just as if Sable isn't there at all. Not a hair on his head moves even though he is shaking like Santa Claus—he likes to keep that much goop in it.

"I think it was the Plastocene," Joy says. "It takes a hundred years for the groundwater to make it to the coast from here."

"Come on, then. Come on. Ease down," Yossar says.

"Quit talking to us like we're cattle," I say to him.

"Well, Jessup, no need to get offended," Vance says then. "But at least I know that the era was called the 'Miocene,' that that was the time when all of Turkeyfoot was under an ocean. And so what if I don't want to stay here? Where do you think money comes from, anyhow? Don't you think someone has to work for it?"

"You don't even start to talk to me about work," I say to him.

Because I know about work—my hands know about work. And Joy has splinters and cactus spines in her hands and her blood on them sign posts, and I don't need sympathy, but damned if I haven't lost some of my own skin while sanding down boards in the cabin and there was also that time when I poked my finger open on a rusted can in the creek, which could have killed me from Tetanus or some

such thing. Which makes me think the only reason he's going for my throat now is because he wants our parents to hear this fight and then, our dad will give him the land without a doubt.

So I say, real loud in case the wind tries to carry off my voice before it gets to the porch where my parents are, "I am getting along just fine here and I have after all not forgotten what it is like to wake up to wet dew on long grass and to have that urge to stick your hands in the earth and plant something."

"And what the hell does that have to do with anything, Jessup?" Vance throws in. "Staying here and running the farm is always what the ones who *can't* get out do—always has been."

"So you're saying that you don't want to live here?" I say—extra loud, again. "You have no interest in living here at all?"

"You never stop angling, do you?"

And after Vance says that, I stand up and look at all of the faces around the picnic table and they stare at me strange, each like a moon going around some alien planet—I don't know. My cousin Richard coughs and pushes his chair back, too.

"I've got to get on," he says. "This isn't what I came here for."

I can appreciate his honesty, and I hadn't really gotten excited for Vance to just ruin this, either. I don't know. Maybe I don't know any of them anymore, maybe not even Joy because she still has her damn hands up like she is summoning spirits or calling in the Second Coming. And sometimes you have these moments where you think, who the hell are these people and why do I have to be related to them? I might as well have a second or third head, but that would be useful. So far, I can't think of anything useful any of them have given me. I just have to work for all of it on my own, never an ounce of help.

Yossar says nothing, either, and here I thought he might stand up for me, being that brother that stayed near home, too. Instead, he puts his hamburger back into his mouth and chews it, one slow bite to the left, one slow bite to the right. Clint doesn't say anything either even though Sable, my wife, is practically his mother since his is gone off into God-knows-where, probably the West or Europe. Even my wife doesn't seem to belong to me anymore.

"Vance," she's saying. "We should all try not to be drastic."

Says who.

“Wellup,” I say, prepared to stand up against Vance by myself. “Wellup, if that’s that and this is this and Vance has said what he wants to say, then he can just get the hell out. He can just go and turn right at that crooked sign out front and he can just keep going down that road until it turns and when it does that, he can just forget this place was ever even here. He can just say to hell with family and all that.”

Vance sets down his plastic plate on the table, his hamburger in one hand.

“Is that what you want, Jessup? Okay, okay, let’s go then, Brigget,” Vance says. “To hell it goes.”

Vance and Brigget pick up their hamburgers and walk around front to their car. Their plastic plates, which they leave on the table, fan out into the yard as the wind catches them. Because on top of it all, Vance can’t stand to see Turkeyfoot look so nice.

“Enough with this,” Joy says as Vance and Brigget turn the corner of the house. “Uncle Vance—” she starts to say, but that same wind that took the plates takes her voice, too. Either that or he is ignoring her on purpose. And who wants him back, anyway, after what he said.

So then Jemson and June look at each other and don’t say a word but push their chairs back. June puts her Coke can on her plate so it doesn’t blow away and nods to my wife. She doesn’t look once in my direction.

“You’re welcome for dinner,” I say to her. “Sorry you couldn’t stay longer.” But she still doesn’t look at me as she follows her brother around front.

We sit mostly quiet after that, staring at the five empty chairs pried out from the tangle of metal legs. The family pushes potato salad on their plates, and lets the wind knock over the napkins. The family eventually gets up, in small groups at first and then in crowds. Most of them do the same as Jemson and June—nod at Sable, maybe pat Joy on the shoulder. Me and Joy watch them leave, stacking into vans and four-doors with Tupperwares of untouched foods that Sable makes up for them in the kitchen. Sable has a cake she had made in her right hand when she comes out to say goodbye to the last

group—the cake has green icing in the shape of the Jalin cabin—and she hugs the family with her left arm. When the family goes over to Joy, she refuses to hug them back—she tells them that it’s stupid, being this way, and can’t the family stay for cake at least? I guess I haven’t taught Joy yet that you count on family until they let you down. The family pulls off onto the road and drives into the pine trees. After the last of them leaves, we go back to the table—me, Sable, Joy, Yossar, Clint, and that girlfriend of his—and finish the nice meal by ourselves. But that’s how it goes. My brother Vance never lets the past just die.

Clint

When I list the things I can do and the things I can’t do in my head, I like to think I can always tell when somebody needs help. That’s what I am the best at of all the things I can do—I can tell who needs help and what they need. Sometimes, I can’t do what it is that needs to be done, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t know it needed to be done in the first place.

They leave us in the worst part of the day when the sun hazes over and the air is so humid, it’s nearly visible. There’s a hot wind, too, that takes off with the abandoned paper plates, but it doesn’t cool us—Trinnie wipes at her forehead when she thinks I can’t see her from the corner of my eye. Wind doesn’t help the muggy down here because the swamps are so close. Anything that’s ever been cold just gets sticky and waterlogged in this part of the world. Think about it—the Turkeyfoot River? Where does it start? It flows straight out of the rocks up in the Blue Ridge Mountains, coming out from under the hills nice and cool, fresh. By the time it’s found itself down here, having to jog down the hills and into the Piedmont, then slowing, crawling across cotton fields and underneath cracked two-lane highways, it’s nothing but stale water hot and just about anything but refreshing on a June afternoon.

Next to me at the table, Trinnie pulls buns out of a plastic bag. She pulls each bun with the long tips of her fingernails, making half-moon creases in the brown tops of the bread. Joy sits near my Aunt Sable, then several chairs down is my dad, then at the end of the table so far that I have to speak a little louder if I want him to hear me is Jessup. Some of the chairs fell over when our relatives left. Nobody bothered to set them up right again. When they all left, we were on the first serving—Aunt Sable made

enough food for everyone to have at least two and a half servings. Just on the table alone, we have a plate of bratwursts stacked five-high like Lincoln logs, six bowls of baked beans, and a corner of the table devoted just to buns and condiments.

“Do you all say grace?” Trinnie asks after a silence that feels stiff with Jessup’s anger. She unfolds her paper napkin into her lap. “Should we say it before round two?”

“Good food, good meat, good God, let’s eat,” Jessup says.

“Chew ‘em up and lock ‘em down,” my dad says.

“Over the teeth and through the gums, look out stomach, here it comes,” Jessup says.

“Amen,” my dad says.

Jessup pulls his second burger patty and a bun from the serving plate and begins to squeeze mustard across the bottom bun. I pick up a bowl of potato salad. The serving spoon slickens in my hand. I shake the spoon until some of the potato salad glops onto my plate but the rest is stuck on the spoon. Quarters of wet potato hang like little cliff-climbers to the edges. I shake it so that the little cliff-climbers won’t go back into the bowl. There is a fox on the handle of the spoon and I can see more of its silver body each time I shake my hand up and down.

“Clint,” Aunt Sable says to me. “Don’t let her see you playing with your food.”

Except it’s the humidity, not that I’m playing. More of the salad smacks onto my paper plate and beside me, Trinnie covers her mouth with her fingertips, jiggling just slightly, just enough for me to know she is laughing inside. Trinnie pokes a serving of green beans with a plastic fork. All of the forks are plastic—Aunt Sable has a basket of them, and inside it, their white tines tangle together. We are eating off of paper plates and the plastic knives cut through the bottoms to expose the bare wood of the picnic table. The table has been left out in a number of rain storms over the years, so you have to be careful not to drag the sides of your hand across it when you reach for your drink. That’s an easy way to get big grey splinters in your skin.

“You’ve had these plates for some time,” I say, thinking how Aunt Sable will like to know that I notice how she is a good saver—which my dad says is something to be proud of in a woman. She keeps

everything, if it can save her a couple of dollars here or there. Once, I watched her pull Tupperware out of Aunt Brigget's trash bin. When she saw that I was watching, she said, "Bleach and hot water. They'll be good as new." I'm not sure Jessup or Joy ever knew about that.

"Well, we cannot suit all of our guests, I suppose," she says.

"I mean, that's a good thing," I try.

The plates have green leaves running along the rim that remind me of the Virginia Creeper on the trees that haven't been covered in Kudzu yet.

"I like that the plates have leaves like your Virginia Creeper you planted," I say to Sable.

"That's a native weed," Joy says. "But you're right. It can be pretty, can't it?"

"Some greenhouses are beginning to carry it, Joy," Trinnie says. "Because it has that deep red color in autumn. People like it as a ground cover."

"Kudzu started off the same way," Joy answers. "Look at it now. You couldn't call that a greenhouse plant anymore."

Which is something I didn't know, initially. Since Joy went to school, I like to think I've learned, too.

Aunt Brigget and Uncle Vance's plates are caught in the pine tree by the porch. That's where the wind has taken them, and the top sides show out so that the plates give that tree eyes. Two white eyes with little green rims where I know the Virginia Creeper is running around the edges. Aunt Sable notices them, too. She sets down her bratwurst and leans her forehead onto her hands.

"I'll get them down—it's no problem," I say to her. "Right after dinner. I don't mind at all."

"Leave them," Jessup says. "They can serve as Brigget and Vance's tombstones."

"Jessup," Aunt Sable says. "Please, let it go. This is not for you and Vance. This is for your parents."

"But in a tree?" I ask. "It looks like litter."

“Disagreements happen,” Joy cuts in, “and that is no reason to disown family especially since even in disownment, they are still related—remember that. Disownment makes him no less your brother.”

“Leave the plates in the tree,” Jessup says to me. “That way the tourists can see them, too. No sense in burying them in the graveyard.”

“He’s done so much for us,” Joy says.

“Joy,” Aunt Sable says to her. “Just let him be angry.”

Joy shakes her head and pushes back her chair. She takes a bowl of corn from the table and walks around, scooping a spoonful onto each of our plates. The bowl is handspun clay, a mountain craft fair find of my Aunt Sable’s, I imagine, and so it’s too heavy to pass around. She has the bowl curled into her arm. I say, “Thank you,” when she gets to me. Trinnie does, too, but everybody else has taken to staring at their plates.

“I’m going up to give them some corn,” Joy says to the table. She means the grandparents, who we have left on the lounge chairs up on the porch. I hope Trinnie doesn’t think badly of us for that when it’s just that my grandmother can hardly hold up her own head and my grandfather falls asleep from being so exhausted fighting off his lung cancer.

So now we are sitting, eating, and not talking. We can just make out Joy’s bird voice coming down from over the porch railing above us. Each of us has our own plate, which is normal, but the plates become a private conversation for each of us. As in, how do you like holding my food, plate? You like to hold it? Okay, I will eat another bite of corn off of you. And to hell with the other folks. They can eat their own damn corn in silence. Except occasionally, Trinnie’s ankle bumps against mine. Her toes sometimes crawl along my shin, but she never says a word, either. Still, I feel bad that she has to see us like this. I don’t feel like she is getting the real idea of the family and of who we are. Or you know, maybe she is getting the right idea and it’s just me who’s been seeing it wrong all these years.

Nobody says word one while Joy's feeding the grandparents. When she comes back down, she is smiling again and says things at relatable intervals, just to remind us that we are a family, even if that's not what Trinnie is seeing. She says things like:

"Mom, you always did replicate Grandma's cornbread with the best accuracy."

"Uncle Yossar, have you given any thought to extending the fence in the family plot?"

"Well, how do we make it whole again?"

This last part makes everybody who is looking at their plate and their forks on the way to their mouths stop doing all of that and look at Joy instead.

"Make what whole?" Jessup says. "There's nothing here that isn't whole."

"The family," Joy answers. "I think it's going to take an apology."

"What on earth would I want to apologize for?" Jessup says. "Why would I want to say a word to any of them after what Vance said to me?"

"Do you want the land?" Joy asks him.

Jessup doesn't say anything or look at any of us. We all know the answer, anyway.

"Then you better find a way to make it right," Joy says.

Joy

I lean on the table, none of us are talking, trying to think of "family" as "collective," a group of similar genetics held together through blood—as though the blood fills the physical spaces between us, holding us together. Blood is something they can't escape—not Vance or Richard or Jemson or any of them, no more than I can escape it, should I ever want to—which I won't. Except here is Trinnie, a cancer in our blood, sitting with us after having seen a family, those who share common blood, common heritage, fracture and disperse, like she has simply grafted herself into our system. Because what kind of person stays in an unfamiliar group after a display like the one put on here today? Who would think to him or herself that this is a group of people I'd like to associate with? And maybe she is with us because her family doesn't meet or try or force itself—maybe her family just lets itself fracture and disperse,

which is what we know better than to let happen, even if we need genetics to go ahead and prove it for us. Likely she doesn't understand preservation, that desire to keep your fragile roots intact, to keep the rain from rotting them and the moles from eating them and the droughts from suffocating them, all so that if you have to transplant, you can take the main parts with you and then you won't die, not ever, so long as you keep those roots strong and safe. Like with Vance and Brigget, they may think they can storm off and leave us behind, but they can't escape the title of "aunt" and "uncle," they can't escape the one half sameness between me and them. That is a fixed ratio.

Answers aren't found in silence—that's what I keep thinking. Looking around the table, we had five faces when we should have twenty or more, plus we have two old folks—my grandparents—that should be in bed dying while they are instead laid out as if posing for a tanning salon or a tourist attraction. How did this happen? I can't eat with my mind moving so fast. All I can think is, how did it come to this? How did we become that family—the one that cuts off relatives and throws words at each other like knives?

My mother peels cucumbers off of one of the sandwich triangles as we sit in silence. She sets the triangle on my plate, catches me in the eyes with her stare, and nods like, well eat it. And has it come to this? We can't even *communicate*, which is what families are supposed to do? Dad sits across from me at the table. Every couple of minute or so, he looks over his shoulder out at the back pasture, likely surveying his handiwork on the cabin, and wipes his face with his paper napkin. His hair is thinning out at the top, tufts of it poking out in little explosions of smoke. Yossar hunches over his plate, using his shoulders to shield his face from the rest of us—he could be crying, laughing, any of it. Like we will ever know. Trinnie fills her plate once more, cleans it, and sits with her eyes on nothing. Maybe she's counting the grains in the rice bowl. Clint's thoughts on all of this seem to cross with mine in the middle of the table. I watch him try to eat twice as much just to make up for all of the food going to waste. I wonder how he is finding room for extra food since he's so tall and has no real stomach to speak of. When the plate of hamburgers only has one patty left, Clint eats that, too.

“So nobody has an idea?” I ask the table. “Is this how we want to live the rest of our lives? Just two lonely branches on the big oak tree?”

“Let him apologize when he will,” my dad says. “Don’t count on me to do the calling.”

What he doesn’t know is that if he’s not careful, my grandfather is going to do what he’s wanted to do all along—he’s going to will the land straight to Vance. And where will that leave my mother and dad. I asked my grandfather that question as I scooped corn on his plate, and his answer? Someday, he said to me, your father is going to have to learn. Learn what, I’m just not sure, but taking hard work and dedication from my dad doesn’t seem like the right way to teach that lesson, if you ask me.

“He could do an awful lot for the battle site, if you’d let him,” I say to my dad.

“Did you not hear him, Joy?”

“If you would let him,” I continue. “Then he might be more willing to help us out.”

“Your Uncle Vance is a cruel man,” my dad says.

But as to the financial assistance, there have been things that Uncle Vance has given to me that he has not given to my dad. Firstly, he pays my tuition at the university. Supposing my dad did learn this factoid, conflict would develop because my dad might feel slighted and insufficient, but realistically, he could no more afford to pay for something that expensive than he could learn how to fly. In order to keep this secret, my mother straightens out details on whispered phone calls to Vance—thus brewing more conflict between my uncle and father. Also, my Uncle Vance took it upon himself to call and preach to me about Opportunity. Opportunity is something he has provided in the way of giving his children a chance to “Make It” in the world. This is a chance, he said, that my own father couldn’t give me, not even as the Head Tour Guide of Turkeyfoot Civil War Battlesite—later, I discovered Vance had heard Jessup’s plan to have me work over the summer and that he was afraid Jessup might convince me to not go back to school in the fall. On top of all this, Vance has consistently paid for my books, pencils, a new bag for a new laptop, some clothes, and a sweatshirt with the school mascot printed on the front. I guess I have more of a reason to believe in his generosity than my dad does, but still.

Once, I asked Uncle Vance once why he had lived in the old house so long before moving to Charlotte. He had said that in order to “help out” the family, he had to stay “downsized.” When I asked him what he meant by “help out,” he rubbed his fingers together in the manner of the international symbol for money. If he gave me so much, did he give to Clint, too? And did he resent us, think of us as money grabbers or freeloaders or leeches? What could he have if he did not have us, and what would he buy if he did not support the rest of the Jalins? Would he have a yacht out in Wilmington? Would he build a country mansion right on top of Turkeyfoot?

I think of that again now as we sit around a relatively empty table, eating too much food in silence when we should be barely able to hear one another, shouting across the table at each other, bringing up that time that Ollie got his pants caught on the fence or when Aunt Sandra wore only hand-knitted sweaters for a year and we all teased her about knitting those sweaters out of the hair her dog had shed off and how they were all the red rusted color of her Irish Setter, Precious. So what is the scale of cruelty? What constitutes the top-level of cruelty? If most cruel equals endured most quickly, then should we expect Vance and the rest of the family’s abandonment of us to be an immense yet short-lived pain? If it’s the other way around and this is a minor act of cruelty, I don’t think that I could bear a long-lived dull ache of absence.

After we finish eating what each of us can stomach and we throw away our paper plates (lest they find themselves in the trees next to Brigget and Vance’s), I leave Trinnie with my mother to wrap and freeze all of the food that is left over. My mother brings a box of zip-top bags outside and they develop a system—Trinnie with a spoon and my mother with a plastic zip-top bag or a freezer-safe container, holding whatever it is open so that Trinnie can lop the food in. They smile and chat about Trinnie’s interests—horses, I guess—and so I slip off, unnoticed.

I find Clint outside, alone, leaning on the side of the house. He has his long hands pushed to the palms in his jeans’ pockets, and his face is no longer cowboyish now but pink in a way that suggests softness beneath the rough pocks of stubble. When he isn’t flirting or impressing or talking to fill voids of vacant space, his expression often has the look of someone who had recently been told that their dog

had terminal cancer—not exactly an expression of utter tragedy, but certainly somber, crushed. He reminds me, leaning on the house, of an incident in our childhood involving Jemson pushing him on the compost heap that used to substitute for a sandbox. I try to picture his face with coffee grounds on it, but he has changed too much—I can't see coffee grounds stuck in the stubble on his cheeks, but I can imagine lipstick or popcorn or urban air.

“Where did you get her,” I ask. I lean on the house next to him, crossing my legs like his and putting my fingers into my jeans pockets.

“On a dig,” he says. “She has a friend with horses. All of them are dying. Something in their spines.”

“Where,” I say.

“Dogwood Farm,” he says. “This is our first date. Not such a great impression, I would guess.”

“She seems okay with it,” I tell him. “Maybe her family is worse.”

“It's too bad she had to see us this way.”

“Some people don't mind conflict,” I say. Before us, we can just see the side yard of our neighbor's house. We watch their tiny figures bustle as if on a breeze, as if they are small distant dogwood leaves being blown about their back porch.

“She's got some issues with her mom, I guess,” he says. “She's from New Jersey.”

“Why is she here?”

“I haven't had a chance to ask her,” he says.

“What does she do for a living?”

“I'm not sure. Something with horses, I guess.”

“You don't know her very well,” I say. “Here's an easy one: What's her favorite color?”

“Purple. I don't know. Maybe yellow. I like her,” he says. “I wish she wouldn't have seen us this way.”

“I don't know what you expected,” I say.

Our neighbors, like little ants on their porch, bring plates to their table and sit in tiny chairs. I can just hear thick laughter rolling across the spanse between our houses.

“It would just be nice, that’s all. To think we had a family that we could bring other people into.”

“Why can’t you?” I ask. “She seems unaffected.”

“It’s not pleasant, you know? There’s too much conflict, and I think it’s going to get worse.”

“It didn’t use to be this bad,” I say. It didn’t. “What happened?”

“Then it’s going to be about the inheritance, when Grandpa dies.”

“What should we do?”

“About?”

“Do you want to be a part of one of those families?” I ask. “The ones that have brothers who never speak to each other or parents that disown their own kids? Do you remember when we had barbeques in the back pasture once a month? Grandfather on the grill and we would go down and watch the younger cousins get in the creek, your dad and my dad and Uncle Vance would set up croquet in the back, there were dogs barking and all of this laughing and nobody would leave until Midnight and some would just stay the night, nestled all together on the living room floor with blankets and sleeping bags—the grown-ups and the kids and dogs one tangle?”

“Would you have preferred that Vance and everyone else would have come to sleep tangled up on the living room floor? I don’t see any way to fix it, Joy.”

We watch to wind push around the dying leaves on the maple trees. The side yard is shaded—I shiver. Across the way, the tiny neighbor family tumbles laughter to us and their silverware flashes in the sunlight.

“Okay,” I say. The void—the silence that isn’t real silence because of the shaking maple leaves and the wind and the metallic claps of pots and pans in the kitchen. I need more talking. “Then let’s invent a way.”

“Look,” Clint says. “You think Vance is mad—at you, at Jessup, maybe at all of us. He may be, but what if he’s not planning on disowning us? What if he’s just cooling off? We can’t really expect,

now that all of us cousins are caught between childhood and having our own kids, that anybody would or could have to time to spend a whole day at a family reunion. These kinds of get-togethers are for kids, Joy. Don't you think that fights happen at nearly everybody's family reunions? I won't deny that I'm embarrassed for us, but I don't think we're the only family to have a fight at a reunion. It's entirely possible that there isn't anything to fix."

"That's not true, necessarily," I say. "I don't think adulthood ends the need to have familial connections."

"Familial connections'? Joy, get serious. Let's change the subject."

"Don't you want to fit somewhere, Clint? Don't you want to look at me and know without asking that I'm not going to abandon you or toss your darkest secrets into the wind or that with me, because our blood could just about mash together and there wouldn't be much of a difference, that you could always have a warm bed or a meal or an identity, a sense of who you are and where you came from, even if nobody else knows?"

"Let's change the subject, Joy. This is too much. You're spending too much time by yourself in the library."

"Okay," I say. "Okay, but know that, Clint. Know."

"I've been thinking some serious things, Joy. I have to tell you," he says. "Can I tell you?"

The wind carries my bangs across my face so that I can't see him next to me. I push them over my forehead and turn my head. His eyes spread wide so that he looks suddenly like someone who might not be related to me.

"I think it's time to get away from the digging and away from here," he says. "I've been thinking, how often do people need backhoes, anyway? I mean, a freelance backhoe guy like my dad? Is that where I want to go with my life?" Clint pulls his palm over his face. "He's already trying to turn the business over to me, and you know, maybe I don't want it. Maybe I don't want to dig a hole every time a horse or a person dies within three counties. Do you know, really know, how much time I spend on that

backhoe? He only takes people, now. I have to do all of the horses, all of the other digging. Maybe I want more, Joy.”

“A vacation would be good for you,” I say. “I agree that there needs to be some change around here. Same thing with my dad. It’s like he wants me to see the future for him and I’ve got to figure out what Turkeyfoot needs to do in order for us to be successful, too. Look how successful Cowgrove is, for example.”

“I dug out a hole for their Authentic Farmstead mule last month,” Clint says. He pulls himself off the side of the house. The wind lifts itself in his dark hair. His eyes are tight slits to the sun as he steps out of the shade. “Maybe there’s somewhere else I could go that’s not here. What do you think, Joy?”

I imagine Clint away, in various places. Alaska—that is away. He would be in a cabin, fighting off bears and fishing for his dinners in a river frozen mostly during the year. Or he would find some Southwest border town. He would help immigrants cross the border in the bed of a pickup truck for a small fee—twenty bucks a head just so they could reach America, but Clint would never charge that much, he would be most popular because he would offer discount rates on account of poverty situations. I think of Clint writing me letters, wearing the plaid shirt he’s wearing now—real paper letters in his own circular handwriting—from the frontier. But where would that be now? Is there anywhere left for Clint to disappear into? I consider the places where Clint would not only be away, but also disappeared:

Montana (I had learned in a Social History class that there are only a few thousand people there, cutting a living out of the land in the form of alfalfa, dude ranches, and fly fishing tours. All things that Clint knows nothing about but he has always been fast with learning routines and he’s good at working with his hands).

Siberia (I don’t think Clint would handle the cold, but if he took Trinnie, she could keep them both warm with her bear-furred arms and her thick black native hair).

Suburbia (in a mid-sized house, a typical dog, a typical girl—Trinnie, maybe—in a yard, green with Clint mowing in the summers and shoveling snow in the winters and I might drive by without even

recognizing him because of the sameness between him and everyone around him. He would not write letters from Suburbia. I might get an email once every few months, something lacking punctuation and proper spelling like, ‘oh he joy doing fine and you.’ He would not even complete his sentences in these emails. I would try to call him, to stay in touch, but the girl/Trinnie would answer and say, “He’s out mowing. He’ll have to call you back, Hon.” But he wouldn’t call back. I would only catch him on Christmas or Thanksgiving as his family ran out the door to church or the neighbor’s dinner party. I would send birthday cards and send them also to his children, which he would have then, naturally, but I would hear nothing back. His children would grow up cousinless, unable to see their facial features in the facial features of their relatives, or worse, they would find their hair fat and black like Trinnie’s, or coarse hair on their arms, which would also be Trinnie’s, or they would not find clothing to fit their potato-shaped bodies. And that would be the end).

Clint turns to face me, strands of his chunked hair floating over his face as the wind pushes them into the sharp edges of his stubble. I want to see a hint of dampness in his eyes—some indication that he might miss us if he leaves, but he is smiling.

“What do you think Joy?” he asks again.

“Suburbia sounds far away,” I say to him.

“I talk to Jemson about it,” he says. “He says raccoons get into his trash cans. He was telling me the other day that he saw a deer in his neighbor’s yard, eating geraniums. What’s the difference, really? Paved roads don’t sound too terrible to me.”

“You live in town. You have paved roads. Do you really want to live like Jemson and June?” I ask. June once told me that since moving to New York, she hasn’t seen a blade of grass. I said—Central Park? And she said that might as well be the Moon to her.

“It’s something different, anyway. Wouldn’t it be something to get out of town?”

“Out of town,” I say. I mean it as a question—it comes out like a statement, an affirmation.

“I thought you would like that idea. We, you and me, we don’t have to be stuck here dealing with family feuds and disagreements. We could be like Jemson and June and get out, right?”

“Out of town,” I try again—it’s still a statement. I watch Clint think I’m agreeing. How can I make him stop? “What about Trinnie?” I ask him

“You’re going to laugh—don’t laugh. I wonder if I couldn’t get her to come with me, Joy.”

“You barely know her,” I say. My voice starts to squeak. I swallow so he won’t notice. “You need to stay and get to know her better. I want to get to know her better.”

“That’s sweet of you, Joy.”

“If it worked out, we could babysit each other’s kids. Have our own reunions,” I say. “No fights or disagreements. Trinnie and I could start shopping together. Sit together and watch all of our kids from the porch.”

“You’d need a guy first,” he says. He winks at me and points his elbow into my arm. “And I bet there’d just be fights eventually—look at what happened between Aunt Sable and Brigget.”

“It wouldn’t be like that,” I say. “I wouldn’t let that happen.”

“I’m glad we’re close enough that I can trust you not to say anything,” Clint says, winking again. “We definitely understand each other, don’t we, Joy?”

Then he is walking—he even has bounce in his rhythm—and I don’t know what to say to make him stop. He turns the corner of the house, and I don’t know what to say to make him stop.

Sable

I am not one who will cry. Life is tough, as the saying goes, and you have to be tough enough to get by and deal with all of it. The expectations you hold in your hand as a child blow away and mix with someone else’s soil. You want to believe life is a series of choices until the day you look in the palm of your hand and those expectations you thought you were still carrying have disappeared. You are left with nothing else but the lines in your hands of what could have been. Joy is tough, or she thinks she is awfully tough. Perhaps it is an act. She sits at the table while I wait with the phone for the call that perhaps, maybe they are all dead, including my sister. Clint’s girlfriend is a good girl. She brews us hot tea, which would be something comforting if I should find that my side of the family is indeed dead.

Jessup's family has come, argued, and left. When I planned this reunion, I asked Vance to call his direct relatives while I called my own family and invited them to join us from the mountains. Joy herself hardly knows them. Even I have not seen the faces of my sisters in years.

Yet, I am my sister's emergency contact and I have been the holder of this important position since our parents were killed in a car accident while driving in the mountains. Growing up, my sisters and I lived with them in a house that clutched to the granite sides of a soft-rising mountain. If you leaned too far over the deck, you might fall into the valley. At nights, we were too far from streetlights. We only knew the location of the other mountain tops by the flashing red tower lights blinking out from the stars. There is a road up there, Old Forty, where semi-trucks frequently burn out their brakes and simply barrel into the bumpers of small cars. Every week, the newspeople have another story—a reporter crushed to death, an old couple out leaf-watching plummeted from the road by a runaway truck, maybe a college student the same age as my Joy just flattened by six melting wheels. The smell of this highway never leaves you. Sometimes I am driving on flat landscapes when I smell the hot melting tires, and I know that the trucks cannot run me over when there are no hills on which the truck can escape, but still, I am afraid. The burning rubber sears fear into your memory.

My sister and I, we were grown but we had not had our own children when our parents were killed by such a truck—I wonder, what might they have thought of Joy? I do not think that we are special or unique in our losses. Many families in the mountains have lost family members on the same highway—but I should think it makes me a little more paranoid about other members of my family dying in cars. If it can happen once, well, it can surely happen twice, or three times. Maybe more—I saw a family on a television special who lost two brothers, three children, and both sets of their parents to car accidents in four separate incidents on a highway down in Georgia. The story claims there is a blind spot that blocks a small car from seeing barreling semi-trucks. I ask myself, how do you keep starting over?

“Perhaps there has been an accident,” I say to the window. If I strain my ears, if I can see farther than the horizon, perhaps there will be a burning van with my sister inside. Perhaps she will not be

inside. Perhaps she will be thrown onto the road way. If this is the case, I can only hope that a passerby will remove his shirt to cover her head.

“I’m sure that’s not what happened,” Trinnie says to me.

“You deserve the courtesy of a phone call,” Joy says.

It is as if both of my sisters are on the edge of our porch in the mountains and they are leaning too far over the railing. I reach my hands to grab them, but they are already falling down into the valley.

Perhaps it is not them falling. I am the one falling away from them, into that valley.

“Perhaps I have not received a phone call because something terrible has happened,” I say to those girls. They have not learned foreboding. They have not learned loss. “She could be dead—how would we know?”

“A hospital would call,” Joy says.

I would like to believe this statement is true. Maybe following such an accident, a hospital would not know to call here. Or maybe a hospital has already called—could the line have been busy? Maybe we were outside. Perhaps the hospital called while Jessup and Vance were fighting. Such a scenario would explain why I had not heard the phone ringing.

“I heard it depends who is listed as the emergency contact,” Trinnie says. “I had a friend once, her mom wasn’t listed as her contact. She was skiing and broke her leg, but they couldn’t find her mom. She had to lay in a bed with a broken leg and no pain medicine because then, she was underage and they couldn’t give her medicine until they contacted her mom.”

“‘Lie’,” I say to her.

“No, it’s true,” Trinnie says. “She told me about it as soon as she got back.”

“She had to ‘lie’ in a hospital bed,” I say. Even in the face of potential tragedy, I would like for Clint to have an articulate woman with whom to spend his time.

“I bet a hospital would have called—but it’s possible that they wouldn’t know this number, right?” Joy asks.

“I am my sister’s emergency contact, and therefore, they would know this number,” I answer.
“That the hospital would not know this number is an unfair assumption.”

“Well, maybe you would just know she was dead because she’s your sister,” Joy says. “Maybe you would just have that bond with her—like twins, right?”

“There’s been a lot of research on siblings and on twins,” Trinnie interrupts. “I’ve heard that—“
“How could I have a bond that lets me know when she is dead? How could I know if she was dead or not if I had not seen her dead body? People have to see a dead body to know that it is dead, Joy. That is why we have wakes. We have wakes to know that the people who we think are dead really are dead. I can see no other point in having a wake.”

Perhaps I have said too much because Joy looks up at me from the table with hurt falling from her eyes. I pick up the cordless phone and hold it to my chest, as if by simply coaxing it to ring, I may find the fate of my sisters.

“I don’t think she’s dead, Mom,” Joy says.

The kitchen smells a little of coffee grounds and cabbage, like rotten wet earth. There is a hint of burning plastic or rubber beneath these smells. Perhaps these are omens that my sister is dead. If they are, I do not accept them.

“They are not dead—if I cannot see that she is dead with my own two eyes, then my sister is not dead. Final,” I say.

There are moments when I am not one to cry. The images of my sister Sandra on the road with a stranger’s shirt over her head or of my other sister Susan crushed between the dash and her seat provoke a welling—my eyes flood. I attempt swallowing against the rock in my throat. When I find this moment to be unavoidable, I turn my back to Joy and Trinnie so that they will not see me in this weakness. I hold the phone in the middle of both of my cupped hands, feeling my shoulders bow over and my hair vibrating in time with hushed hiccups and muted sobs. I do not feel pain rather embarrassment. Trinnie pushes her chair back from the table and comes over to where I stand at the island. Trinnie makes soft hushing noises between her teeth, her palms rubbing ovals across my hunched back. And I let her.

Between my hands, the phone shivers and beeps. My sister's name illuminates the caller ID screen.

"Who is it?" Joy asks. "Is it a hospital?"

"It is my sister," I tell her.

"From the hospital?" Joy asks.

"She is calling from her house."

The phone's beeping lands on the cabinet doors and hammers into our ears. I look to Joy for my actions—do I answer? I ask her with my eyes.

"Don't," she says. "If it's not from a hospital, then don't."

There are many situations that do not involve hospital visits that could also prevent my sisters from visiting me at Turkeyfoot. The phone is now still in my hands. One beep tells me she has left a voicemail. Perhaps if I should listen to this voicemail, I would find the excuse recorded that she has given for each cancelled visit: Something has come up. Sorry to call so late. The car has problems, and frankly, you could come home to see us, too.

It is for this reason I have only had one child of my own. This is what siblings do to one another. In my mind, I extend my arms across the foothills and into the mountains. I reach my hands into the houses of my sisters and let my fingers search the corners for them. Perhaps they are hiding beneath the floorboards or in the bushes along the fronts of their houses. Perhaps they climb trees to avoid me.

I want to explain to Joy that she must not rely on family. I want to explain to her that she must learn to rely on herself. I am more than family—I am mother. I am giver. She can rely on me but she cannot rely on her aunts. She cannot trust her uncles. Clint is like her brother but brother does not equate rely. She has but me in this world and two shadows of family.

When I discovered after moving with Jessup to Turkeyfoot that my sisters would rather stay huddled in the granite mountains, I forged a new sister in Brigget. Brigget finished teaching me the lessons my sisters began to teach me after I moved.

Before, when the cousins, including Joy, were children, they were in a backyard—maybe it was Turkeyfoot—no, it was Vance’s backyard, I remember. This was before Vance began working at the research hospital, examining the effects of pesticides on the human body, or before he moved to Charlotte to have his life outside of the country. His interests have always been different from those of my husband’s, yes, but when our children were little, he was just like us. We had the same of everything. Vance had no more money than Jessup had, than Yossar had.

I remember a summer day, my shirt—cotton—clinging to the sweat on my lower back. I was with Brigget on the back porch of their old house. I think she was wearing a bathing suit and maybe some jeans shorts, but there was no sign of water, no swimming pool or lake for her to use that suit. Joy was in the backyard with Clint—I had Clint so much then, while Yossar was still trying to build his backhoe business. Brigget’s children, Jemson and June, were there, too, all four of them building castles on Brigget’s compost heap. They played in the compost pile because they did not have a sand pit and the compost pile was mostly rotten vegetables and coffee grounds. Brigget did not have anything better to offer the children then—I was ashamed that my child, children when I considered Clint, would play in such filth, but I could not embarrass Brigget by taking my children out of the heap. I could not leave just her children to play in the compost alone. Instead, I would hurry them home and scrub their little bodies in the bathtub, rubbing them down with dish soap and shampoo so that they would not smell or have coffee grounds in their hair for when Jessup and Yossar would be off of work.

Brigget and I watched them, both of us drinking sweet tea spiked with vodka, playing with sandcastle molds, pretending the compost was sand, and that this was the beach, that we were not, in fact, on the back porch of such a house with cracked siding and rotten window frames. Brigget and Vance even had his car on cinderblocks, to complete the picture, and patches of missing grass. Brigget said how Vance wanted to rebuild the car, but he never had the time. I knew—he never had the money.

From the compost heap that day, I heard June say to Clint, “All you had to do was dig a trench and use the dirt from the trench to make the moat walls—but you can’t do it right.”

It was true. Clint had made the walls uneven and in some places, they were crumbling.

“Makes you wonder who his mother is,” Brigget said, and coughed out a laugh.

June and Jemson laughed, too, and Jemson said, “Don’t you know that coffee grounds are no good for making walls?”

And June said, “Clint—you must be stupid. I bet you’re not really even our cousin. We don’t have stupid cousins. You don’t even have a mom, do you?”

“Hey,” I yelled to them. “That is enough!”

“Shhhhhh,” Brigget said. “They’ve got to learn to fight their own battles.”

Joy did not laugh—she seemed to be watching for developments. As a child, she was most attached to Clint, but here, two of her cousins had pointed out that she was not stupid. For Joy, I was sure that must have been such a nice feeling, when people your age did not think you were stupid.

All of the children had black hands from the compost, and Clint stood up to push Jemson—there were two little black hand prints on Jemson’s white shirt—and Jemson and June laughed at Clint again because he could not even come up with a good defense for himself. His little face had a smear of black compost and I wanted to rush over there with my shirt sleeve, to wash that filth off of him.

“You need to be playing nicely,” I called over to the children.

As a response, Jemson gave Clint a hard shove and said, as Clint was falling backward into a collection of rotten lettuce, how Clint had pushed him “like a girl.” Brigget said nothing. She sipped her tea with a mouth-sucking noise. I could just see her teeth between her almost-smiling lips.

“Brigget,” I said. “We should stop this before someone gets hurt feelings.”

“Well,” she answered. “He did push like a little girl—June could hit harder than that, after all.”

I wonder even now if maybe Brigget had not noticed because Jemson and June were laughing so hard at Clint, but Clint had his black hands on his face and he was smearing wet coffee grounds on his cheeks, and his little shirt that I had washed, that I had put into the dryer and folded into his dresser, was now stained across the back with red juices of unknown origins. I set down my glass and gave a hard look to Brigget. I was prepared to put an end to all of this, Brigget or no, but before I could get to the compost heap, Joy put her hand on Clint’s tiny shoulder blade.

“Okay, you might not be as smart as we are,” I heard Joy say. “But you’re the nice one, you’re the nicest cousin we have.” Joy told him not to cry, that he was not really all that stupid.

From the porch, Brigget said, “Even I’m laughing at that!”

I did not turn back to face her. Instead, I took my Joy by the hand and lifted Clint up onto my hip. Coffee grounds slid down the side of my shirt from his hands, and he cried black tears that came off his cheeks and onto my shoulders. We left the backyard through the wooden fence and walked back to our rental house, Clint on my hip the rest of the way home, Joy holding my hand with her sweat-slick little fingers. Joy kept saying, “Clint don’t cry, Clint don’t cry, Clint don’t cry” until her voice fell in time to our footsteps and we passed dogs on porches that barked low hound calls to us on the road.

Brigget is my sister only through a piece of paper in the courthouse—she is my sister-*in-law* only. My own sisters are sisters through the blood in my veins. Perhaps it is true that my own expectations have always outweighed the possibilities with which I have been met.

Vance

I have failed. I imagined myself a greater man than is possible for me to be. I imagined my mind tempering my anger. I imagined myself rising above the conflict, floating over the table with arms wide and benevolent while the family, my disciples, fell silent with peace and thankfulness and the bounty of the land. Then I opened my mouth and saw my body crash back to the table.

The road extends before me. I am suddenly capable of only cliché. Get over yourself, I say. You’re between a rock and a hard place, I say next. Don’t make mountains out of mole hills. I say that, too. The crops are still green. The land hasn’t choked the leaves of moisture yet. It is June. The sun shines. Beside me, I have a wife with blonde hair and a waist small enough to wrap an arm around. I have two children on the road behind me. They are successful. They live in exciting places where independent films screen and trendy neighborhoods spring from impoverished inner cities. I have money. The car I drive is not old. When I open the doors in the morning, I am still swallowed in the fabric of new car smell. This is the way it is.

“Aren’t you glad,” Brigget says, “that you can just drive away from that nonsense?”

She spins the dial on the new-car radio. Below the hushed hum of the road beneath my tires chirps a violin, a far distant orchestra. Her hair twists on her shoulder blades. It is the exact color of dead grass.

“I mean, baby,” she says. “We have come a long way.”

Jemson and June are too much like their mother. They have no interest in farms or soil. There is nothing of Turkeyfoot flooding their veins. This is my fault: I did nothing to foster both land and city—I only fostered city: Charlotte. Joy is a problem, too, but of a different kind. Jessup fostered only land in her: Turkeyfoot. Her dedication to that soil in particular makes up for the absence of it in both of my children. She is the same age as they are. I have encouraged in her the concepts of education, concrete, the sound of traffic humming through the windows instead of robins and night crickets—these are the concepts that Sable wishes for her. Yet I am afraid that Jessup will put his claws into her and tell her those claws are called heritage, history, and identity. Because of him, I am afraid she will not leave Turkeyfoot. I am afraid Jessup will convince her of its imminent collapse should she chose to leave.

“I know, I know,” Brigget says. “You don’t like it when I say bad things about Turkeyfoot. You’ve got to let it go, Honey.”

Jessup has the belt buckle with Willy Jalin’s engraved initials. When I visited him long ago at their rental house, he pulled out a shoebox full of Turkeyfoot artifacts: rusted and broken bayonet points, coins, round bullets. He kept the belt buckle wrapped in wool cloth, folded on top of the Turkeyfoot odds and ends, each carefully washed in his sink and polished to museum quality. You see? He has, for months, recited the operations of Cowgrove Battle Site. Sable called me before the reunion and complained that Jessup kept awake our parents as he paced the front room of the Turkeyfoot house, memorizing the mission statement of the American Battle Site Reconstruction and Preservation Program. He has begun to sew a grey wool jacket, a hat. In his closet, I once saw a rifle leaning out of the 1860s.

“It’s just going to rot all to hell when your parents die,” Brigget says. “Aw, come on. Please let’s not do this not talking thing.”

Do you see? Do you see how much more this is than a crooked sign? Jessup thinks the land can be more than it is now. Jessup accuses me of sloth, of not letting the land live up to its potential. But didn't I take care of it? I let it heal—the pesticides that will kill our parents and most of the songbirds are now dissolving under the pasture grass, decomposing with the bodies of the non-native cotton plants. I breathed life back into it. I plowed over the tired topsoil and found the land's past, the before—the arrowheads from the Choctaws, scars from the Revolutionary War (I took these to Cowgrove), trinkets owned by our own flesh and blood a hundred years ago: marbles, half of a cameo, a fork, watch chains.

“Vance,” Brigget says. “Your brother is an idiot. He's a redneck. I don't know why you even try. Don't worry, Honey. I bet your dad's going to will that land to you.”

Can Jessup really believe that driving signs into the precious skin, the topsoil, can improve the place? He cut down stands of pines and maples to repair and rebuild the old Jalin cabin out back. He cuts down the pasture grass so that the tourists don't have to worry about ticks or tag-alongs. He has more ideas: paved areas for tour buses, concrete walkways, goat and cow sheds. This reunion was the first time I have seen the land since Jessup took over helping. What he won't understand is that this isn't about the sign. The sign is merely the culmination of many small signs driven into the soil with the force of a hammer. Some of the signs are not small: one of the signs is a kept secret. The secret is hot against the inside of my ribs. I am afraid of that secret. To see Jessup's face is to see that secret ablaze—his teeth like knives as he runs out through the pines. As he leaves me with Yossar to suffer the burns this secret leaves on us. I have never believed anything so strongly as that Sable sleeps beside a pit of snakes.

“If you're not going to say anything,” Brigget says, “then I might as well turn the radio back on. I swear, Vance, if I didn't know you better—“

Each mile lessens the pull of Turkeyfoot. Each mile takes Sable's face out of focus. She is the size of a boulder, the size of a peach, the size of a pin. When I reach Charlotte, I will not see her at all. I wanted to give the responsibility of the land to Yossar, he that knows the soil better than any of us, but he has his limp—that constant caller, reminder of the night in which he and I both learned that Jessup will cut us and run to save his own soul. Jessup was my only choice. Brigget would not let me travel the

distance anymore. When I gave him the responsibility, he shook his head and said, “Well thank God, Vance. Thank God somebody has it now that will take care of it.”

“Fine,” Brigget says. “Last chance, Vance. I’m turning up the radio. If you’re not going to talk to me—“

What will I do if my father indeed wills Turkeyfoot to me? I am a coward before this question. Knowing the possibility of him wanting to discuss this with me, I avoided him at the reunion. From afar, I hid behind family members. I pretended not to see him stretched on the lounge chair. When he dies, I feel that I will regret this moment. If I take Turkeyfoot, then what happens to Sable? Will she return to a rental house with Jessup? Then, in the winter, will the heating bills remain unpaid until come the cool nights of March, the electricity will be shut off and the water will spit brown silt in the place of what it should provide? Will he chain her to another impossible vegetable garden or ask her to work next to teenagers in a pizza parlor or teach her to work a sewing machine so that he might pursue another impossible dream?

We reach the outer limits of the city. The cars before us are caught in stop-and-go-traffic. One moves an inch toward downtown Charlotte, and on the other side of the concrete divider, one moves an inch away from downtown Charlotte. Crepe myrtles poke out of the divider, surrounded by shaggy patches of brown grass. Their purple flowers are a faded, muddy lavender from the smog. I want to open my window and listen to the breeze float across my cheeks. Car horns prod each other one inch forward, one inch backward. Can’t you see?

Sable

I will call her when I know she will be back at home in Charlotte. I will even give her an extra hour in case they get caught in traffic. If she thinks that somehow she might avoid a telephone call from me after that display of whatever one might call such a display, then she ought to know me better. If she thinks that she can ruin the final days of her parents-in-law, then she ought to expect that I will have words for her. I will call her so that no one will see me doing it. It is important to me that no one will

know, especially not Jessup, that I call her. Maybe they do not know Brigget and of what she is capable, but I do.

After the men go outside and Joy leaves Trinnie and me to put away the leftover food, I calculate when I can slip away. With each dish put up in the freezer, I think about how I will begin the conversation. Will I start with accusation? Will I pretend that I am calling on behalf of Jessup? Will I simply explain to her that I noticed she and Vance said nothing to his parents, these parents who will be dying in a matter of days? She cannot think that I would let her get away with this.

As soon as the last of the green bean casserole flops into the zip-top bag, I tell Trinnie to go outside and spend some time with her date. No sooner has she departed than I have already dialed Brigget's telephone number. Her telephone rings several times and then her voice comes on, completely soft and relaxed as though she has been simply reclining on the sofa or enjoying a drink on her porch. She says, "Hello" without stating her name or her household.

"Well," I begin, feeling that dark welling in the center of my chest. I have to breathe, to swallow, so that I do not simply attack her. "I suppose that you have something to say to me?"

"No," she says. "I suppose I don't."

"I suppose that it does not concern you that Vance's parents are deteriorating as we speak," I say. Jessup brought them back inside several hours ago. His mother, bless her heart, is sunburned and her breath merely rattles. I believe she will go within the next few days. "Or perhaps I could suppose that you would not let Vance say goodbye to his own flesh and blood?"

"I never have claimed to know what goes on in your suppositions, Sable," she says.

"Perhaps we could agree that leaving in such a manner was inappropriate?" I want to think, what sort of a woman. What sort of a woman does this take, to do this. Only, I know exactly what sort of a woman.

"Don't be cryptic, Sable," she says. "Just tell me that you're pissed off that Vance and I left because your husband is an asshole."

“Okay,” I say, despite her language. “I am angry. I am not, however, going to let you insult my husband or force Vance to abandon his parents in their time of death.”

And then I take a very deep breath, trying as hard as I possibly can to sink that dark welling in my chest. I manage to push it down slightly, but I can still feel it as she talks, just simply sitting at the top of my belly. That anger is a tennis ball in my middle.

“Sable, Sable. Do you ever get tired of being Jessup’s lap dog?” she asks, which pushes that welling directly into my throat.

“This was important to me, you do know this, do you not, Brigget?” I say, but the words are being crushed by that tennis ball-sized welling, which is now coming up and up and up into my throat and mouth. “Would you pretend that I believe your husband is not your lap dog? Brigget, I know what you think of us. I know about the money and the influence and how you talk in hushed words about us as ‘country’ or ‘backwoods.’”

“You don’t know half of what you think you know,” Brigget says. She keeps her voice simply still, as if we are chatting about the weather. “And if you did, you would be smart enough to figure out what kind of a man you’re married to.”

“Jessup?” I ask. “Jessup?”

Through the kitchen window, Yossar and Clint are staking croquet wickets at long intervals in the grass. Joy nods as Trinnie, her back to me, explains something with her hands. Jessup stands holding the colored mallets.

“Vance is tired of it and tired of Jessup,” Brigget says on the line. “They don’t have anything more to discuss.”

“Jessup would do nothing so terrible as to hurt the feelings of his family.”

“Sometimes the trees get in the way of the forest, Sable.”

My husband hands mallets to each of our family outside, and even though we have a porch and a slight change in elevation between us, I can see he grins as he extends the single mallets. I am the one who has been married to him for so long. I am the one who knows him, not Brigget.

“Sable,” Brigget says. If I did not know better, I might mistake sympathy in her voice.

“Remember the shotgun?”

Yes, my grandfather-in-law’s shotgun: a mail-order relic used primarily for shooting squirrels or rattlesnakes that had been willed to Vance after his death. There had been controversy, and my Jessup had made a claim to the gun on the basis that he had used it and hunted alongside his grandfather with it and that Vance had not. Vance had the law on his side, and the paperwork to prove the gun’s new ownership, but Vance did not have the foresight to take that gun out of the county. He knew that Jessup wanted the gun, and Vance should have taken the gun home to Charlotte. He left the gun leaning against the fireplace one week when he took their parents to Charlotte for a vacation. Jessup would go over to Turkeyfoot every day, even after I told him that what he was doing was not what normal people should do. He would not press his face on the window glass as a child may—I knew this because I sometimes would follow him to make sure that he did not find himself in trouble from which I could not save him. Instead, Jessup would check the latches, the door handles, the crawlspaces, all of them, to see if an opening might appear to him. He did this for months, simply to get that gun, and I watched from our parked car on the day he shook open the back window of his parent’s house. I jumped from the car and ran across to the window to follow him, and as I got to the window and began to lift my arms to pull myself in, I heard it: two of the loudest bangs I have ever heard. The shotgun firing. My God, I thought those rounds would go through the window and into my heart at first, and then I thought those rounds might have already gone straight through Jessup’s heart. As I pulled myself into that window frame, I could feel every splinter, every place my blouse would catch on the wood siding. The frame on my fingers pressed sharp into my skin—then I could see: Jessup, the gun on the floor pointing just left of his feet, the barrel smoked in a blue cloud, and two wide wounds in the far plaster of the room behind him. He held his hands apart in the motion of surprise, and I do not think he at first saw my face come out of the window. I spoke to him, “Jessup, Jessup,” I said. “There’s no blood,” he said. “I keep looking and there’s no blood.” We left the gun and drove home and he would not talk except to say that there had been no blood. Later, Brigget had called and said that she and Vance knew he had broken in because of

the window and the gun on the ground, and that Jessup's parents were frightened. I was angry then, because Vance should know better than to leave a loaded gun in a house, especially with the safety off. However, I do not say this. I do not even pretend to know what she was talking about.

"Sable," I hear Brigget say again. "Someone could've been killed, you know. None of us want to have to bring our children around a man like that."

"Tell Vance he needs to come back," I say. I swallow my own feelings for the sake of the dying parents. "Tell Vance they should not have to die without seeing their oldest son once more."

"Tell him yourself," she says. "Don't you think I don't know how much time you spend whispering to him anyway?"

Outside, the croquet game begins. Jessup uses his mallet to strike Joy's ball into the long pasture grass and both of them laugh—this I can see with definition. The telephone comes down from my ear as though it is making its own decisions. I press the end button on top of Brigget's voice saying my name, questioning my presence on the other end, and go out to join my family in the yard.

Vance

When all of the old folks in a family die, somebody has to stand up and decide to lead. Every family needs a leader of some kind. Otherwise, the family falls into decay, disintegrates, rots. The larger unit—cousins, uncles, brothers, sisters, aunts, grandparents—breaks, like an oak tree in a hurricane, into small branches, all of which then are eaten by woodworms and termites at the base of a trunk that once held the branches off of the ground.

This is precisely what will happen to the Jalin family—as sure as I could prophesize it myself, as if I were the Oracle, bare naked and chanting disaster in a smoky, Grecian cave.

My father is dying. I am next to him in his home, in the dusty darkness listening to my sister-in-law pace the hardwoods and cringing with each blood-thick blackened cough that ends in him spitting more discolored gunk into a handkerchief. This is not an uncommon occurrence or sight—so many grown children waiting impatiently for the unfortunate parent to succumb. So many grown children, like

myself, feeling caught between the desire for the horrid coughing to cease and the want to preserve the parent for—I don't know—maybe posterity. Something to show the younger generation what it used to be like when the best form of afternoon entertainment was poking crawdads in a creek.

For three days following the reunion, I tried to call Sable, to ask about my parents. Each time I called, Jessup would answer the phone and I would hang up. Then—yesterday—Sable called me at the lab. You would like to believe you would know the minute a parent dies, even without ever being told. Yesterday morning was a good morning—the sun bright and I sipped a coffee over a newspaper and hit not a single red light on my way to work and I had some kind of burrito Brigget bought from a Mexican Catholic Church fundraiser and I nearly found myself smiling. It was an average day, a decent day, a day that cracked in half—yesterday. That day of my mother's death. When I will think of that day, I will see it numerically, etched into a granite slab. To see that date is not to see my coffee or my burrito or the woman in the red car who waived to me so that I could merge into traffic. To see that date is to realize a point when this person stopped—history will not remember her as mother. History will even forget the cause of her death.

My father is that oak tree trunk and his lungs are the hurricane, black and circling—I see it coming and I am powerless to evacuate. He knows this, my father. He can see his own lungs as the impending disaster not only for himself, but also for the makeup of the family. In his bed, he rolls to his side to face me where I am sitting on my mother's now empty bed. His shoulder pokes upward against the thin sheet that covers him. My father, he brings his waning strength to his hands and clutches my arm, encircling my elbow, and he says, "I told Jessup that I'm giving you the land. It's yours now."

"Why?" I ask. "You know he won't let me take it."

"It doesn't matter, Vance. It's yours."

"He's done too much work to let it go that easy," I say. "He'll fight me for it."

"It doesn't matter. You're the oldest. It has to go to you."

"How?" I ask. "Where's he going to go?"

My father moves his eyes upward, as if he is looking for Jessup hiding behind the window.

“This Turkeyfoot Battle Site idea,” my father says. He whispers, coughing and hoarse. “What was so wrong with cotton and soybeans?”

“He says he’s preserving our family history,” I say.

“That’s not such a bad idea. Maybe that’s your angle,” he says.

“In what way?”

“Help him,” my father says. “Help him get it going. That can be his.”

He coughs, his shoulders heaving beneath the sheets. Specks of blood pattern his pillowcase, and his eyes grey out to blankness.

“Take me to the hospital,” he says.

“Don’t you want to be at home?”

“Do it before Jessup stops you,” he says.

I obey my father. And so I steal him, rob him of his grave at Turkeyfoot, bring him to civilization for a chance to live just a few days longer than God himself might allow—but this is what he wanted, and I obey without asking questions or sticking myself to rigid tradition. I slide him into my car and buckle his bones into the seat and drive him to Charlotte, his head leaned against the window so that his breath forming fog on the glass is the only indication I have that he still lives, breathes. On the day before the cancer squeezes his lungs shut, he again leans over the side of the hospital bed to where I am sitting and says simply:

“You.”

“Excuse me?” I ask.

“Otherwise it will all fall apart.”

“What will fall apart, Dad?”

His eyebrows go up and he pours his face into a handkerchief, his whole spine heaving beneath the hospital gown like a caterpillar crawling up his shirt—I swear I can see goosebumps on his flesh underneath the fabric.

“Don’t let it fall apart,” he says through hiccupped breaths.

“I’m trying to understand,” I say.

“Listen: I will die. You will die. Yossar and Jessup will also die. This is something we have in common. Something else we have in common—“ He begins hacking. Through the retching and dry rasps of his lungs, I can still hear his heart monitor. *Beep. Beep. Beep.* A timid reminder that his heart is still working. All I can think is how his lungs will autopsy. The color is one I am already familiar with from other bodies, bodies of other people’s fathers that I cut apart while thinking, ‘poor unfortunate kids but better them than me.’

“Something else we have in common is Turkeyfoot,” he says at last. “They will find Turkeyfoot soil in the teeth of each Jalin when we die.”

He is wrong, of course, but only sort of. The mineral contents of the water one drinks as a child leaves a chemical trace in the teeth that modern science can use to identify down to a small radius the child’s birthplace. Naturally for myself, Yossar, and Jessup, this place would be Turkeyfoot. If I were to examine the teeth of my children, or of Joy or Clint, I wonder, could science identify them as related through land?

“I’m leaving Turkeyfoot to you, Vance,” he says. “But remember your brothers. Try to remember what’s happened there before. That’s what’s important. That someone remembers.”

“Sherman?”

“All of it,” he says. “We need to get the record right. Our family needs to remember how the Jalins stood up for themselves in the past. Prove that we were a part of something.”

And even though this is my history, I know so little about Willy and Bean and Cole involvement with Sherman. What I do know was that there had been a highly contested chicken, that Willy and Cole had lost their lives, and that Bean had never stopped talking about it. I heard whispers from my long-buried grandmother that Willy had frontier aspirations—how he would talk Manifest Destiny and Rocky Mountains and gold-flecked rivers winding through big game country. She also said Cole had been engaged, that the woman who lost him had also lost hope and the woman had later drowned herself in the swamp with cast aside Confederate chains and an iron ball from the nearby prison. Bean and her mother,

Mom Cora, had to scratch food from the land in order to survive, living morning to that next long morning surprised to wake up, to still have blood moving in their veins. These are the porch-side childhood stories I know from my grandmother, but in accordance with the promises we make to the dying, I begin to research the events that transpired at Turkeyfoot as soon as I leave the hospital, wanting to have everything together so that my father can check the authenticity of any story I can form from land records and newspaper accounts. If I am to be the one who remembers, I want to remember correctly.

Leaning over a table in the basement of my house, I make a timeline so that we might retain the proper order of family events. Here is what I have found, splitting my time that afternoon between the county library, attic-musted boxes of records, and my varied assortment of history books regarding all of the wars in which the Jalins have fought:

1752: Ogden McJalin lands in Wilmington, North Carolina aboard the *Sounder* (immigration records, Aberdeen County Library).

Note: Ogden appears to have come from northern Ireland, although it could be assumed that he had immigrated to northern Ireland from the Highlands. I speculate that he was a member of the Highland Army under 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' that was defeated in 1746 at Culloden Moor. I will provide more information regarding Ogden's immigration if I can find any history of the McJalin clan in Scotland.

1752, October: Ogden McJalin (now "Oggie Jalin") applies for a land grant in Aberdeen County. Granted ten year tax exemption on paying public or county taxes under Royal Governor Gabriel Johnston (Land-grant records, Aberdeen County Library).

Note: I assume this land was Turkeyfoot. I have found one map of the claimed area indicating a small riverlette that resembles the Turkeyfoot creek. Also of interest is this history of agriculture: settlers often removed a ring of bark from the base of the longleaf pines, causing the needles of the trees to fall and allow sunlight to reach the crops planted in the pine woods. Imagine! Forests of longleafs, naked, corn and tobacco poking timid green heads from between the orange crisp-soft bed of needles. What sound does the wind make when it whispers through a barren pine?

1825: Auter Jalin born in Aberdeen County, North Carolina.

1833: Coraline “Mom Cora” Burnette born in Jacklyn County, South Carolina

1849: Coraline “Mom Cora” Burnette and Auter Jalin marry. “Mom Cora” relocates to Aberdeen County.

1850: William “Willy” Jalin born at Turkeyfoot.

1851: Colton “Cole” Jalin born at Turkeyfoot.

1853: Katy Mae Jalin born at Turkeyfoot. Dies in fall of 1853 from unknown causes.

1857: Unnamed Jalin born at Turkeyfoot. Dies two days later from unknown causes.

1860: Bernice Jalin stillborn at Turkeyfoot.

Note: These births and deaths are recorded by the cemetery at Turkeyfoot. Small, crumbling squares of rock outdating Mom Cora’s tombstone file along her footbed. Names and dates are at times almost unreadable. I suspect blue babies, SIDS, or perhaps influenza.

1861: Lt. Auter Jalin joins Confederate Army under General Joe Johnston (draft records, Aberdeen County Library).

Note: I will have to remind myself to tell Joy a story about Sherman and Johnston and their friendship after the war ended. I have discovered that when Sherman died, Johnston was a pall bearer at his funeral. Johnston, not wearing a hat and aged himself, caught pneumonia and died just weeks after burying his rival turned friend.

1861, winter: Bean Jalin born in Turkeyfoot.

1862, early winter: Lt. Auter Jalin killed when his spooked horse rears and flips on top of him.

Note: I have this information in a personal letter found in the attic boxes. In this letter, a colleague writes to Mom Cora: “Tragic how the war can take such a brave man, Mrs. Jalin. Indeed, the horse was his favorite and sacrificed itself alongside your husband—we had to shortly end his mount’s suffering due to injuries sustained to the animal’s back. Your husband was a formidable man for a horse to fall upon, even at his age. Trust in God that he would have wanted to be buried alongside such a mount, and they will wait for you in the afterlife. He will be missed on the front lines, weaving in and out

of the men astride his copper chestnut steed.” Attached to the letter is a chewed daguerreotype of Auter Jalin which I will attach to this family record. He has a heavy block of eyebrows, a thick moustache extending down both sides of his mouth—unsmiling, eyes dark-set and silent. He wears a Confederate hat.

1865, spring: Sherman marching into North Carolina. Areas affected include Laurel Hill (near Turkeyfoot).

Note: I would like to attach several of Joy’s research essays on this topic. This note serves as a reminder to me to ask her for those essays.

1865, May 11: William “Willy” Jalin and Colton “Cole” Jalin shot to death, presumably by the guns of Sherman’s army.

Note: I am troubled by my brother Jessup’s belief that the deaths of these two men is a sacrifice made to save the lives of women. Am I simply to assume that these shooting deaths are the responsibility of Sherman’s army? Sherman said: “War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it. The crueller it is, the sooner it will be over.” Should we not find solace in bloodletting if that selfsame bloodletting prevents the loss of thousands of other victims? What are two or two thousand men dead on a field if five thousand more men get to stay hidden in the forest? If what Sherman said is so, and I believe it is, then Willy and Cole were victims not of Northern Oppression, but of something much, much greater and more human. They are not

thousands of men, their mothers’ tables or Western horizon or wind-chilled winter

I have also

Country Boys Break Peace

William and Colton Jalin, of Turkeyfoot, were arrested yesterday based on a report given by a Confederate Lieutenant, who wishes to remain unnamed, that they were attempting to steal Confederate horses. The Jalin boys deny this claim and contend they were hired to water and feed the horses. The boys, whose father served admirably in our Confederate Army, are as yet not enlisted for service.

two men dead in a field—they are Southerners, eating biscuits at packing a wagon to find that pinching fat cotton in rows down crop furrows.

found these newspaper accounts:

LAUREL HILL SUFFERS GEN. SHERMAN

Many local men were murdered yesterday during the Yankee General Sherman's march northward into Virginia. Among the dead:

Dwight Amstead

James "Jimmy" Allington

Bradley Coddington

Jaydee Douglas

Stanton Douglas

Billy Douglas

Boden Douglas

Jermain Douglas

Arther Franklin

Tim Grundell

William Jalin

Colton Jalin

James Laughton

Robert Lilliman

Interestingly, this account does not mention a chicken—no accounts do. This has nothing to do with an impending threat upon Mom Cora—as I research, I begin to wonder if the deaths of my forefathers are nothing more than representations of Sherman's fair desire to end with just cruelty a war that began with cruelty. He was forcing unfairness, hunger, amputation, murder, and arson to an end that was familiar, an end that mirrored the beginning. I can't find blame in a man's attempts to save the lives of his men, nor can I blame a man who wants to have his feet pulled from swamp water and propped by a fireside by Christmas. As I collate and sort various photocopies of newspapers, records, and letters, I ask if I can find my identity in the questionable actions of two men under the age of twenty who were acting out of rage and desperation—I am beginning to question whether or not they were even soldiers or just

meddlers, because no draft records seem to exist. Is this what it means, now, to be a Jalin? As a child, my father and my grandmother described Willy and Cole with words like Hero, Honorable, Sacrifice, and Legacy. I was told these men acted to protect the land, and when I questioned their allegiance to a nation based on slave labor, my grandmother popped me on my hindside and reminded me that our family never pledged allegiance to those values—we didn't have that kind of money, she offered as a defense. Maybe we didn't support those values. I just don't know anymore.

I take my timeline to the hospital in the morning for my father's approval, but I find the door to his room closed. Sable sits outside of his room next to Joy. Down the hall, I recognize the backs of my brothers by a vending machine.

"He's gone," Sable says to me. I have the family record in a manila envelope. Instead of looking at Sable, I search for his body through the glass window on the door.

I ask a nurse, a dark haired girl, why nobody has called me, why he died and nobody had tried to stop it. Sable says to stop, that I am frightening her, but I can't help myself—I realize, my arms shaking, that I hold her forearm between my hands.

"He said, 'Let me go,'" the nurse says, no, trembles out of her throat. The words, I am shaking her too hard for them to come from her mouth.

"Vance," Sable says. "Vance, she wants you to let her go."

The dark haired nurse bends over and hands me my manila envelope. I didn't notice it fall. She leans, as if bowing to me, and I hold her arm up.

"Let me go," I repeat, my hands falling from her shoulders, slow like two feathers coming off a bird in flight. "Who was holding him?"

"I had his hand," she says. "I had it."

"He needed his family," I say. "He needed something familiar."

She pulls her forearm from my hands. Then she takes up a stack of thin hospital sheets and leaves me in the corridor, timeline in hand and unauthenticated. And in my head, those old words: *better them than me.*

I can't claim to know any more about the truth of the Battle of Turkeyfoot than anyone else can. Disgruntled, ignorant and short-sighted hellions caught in the notion of defense of womanhood, of Southernhood? Likely. Am I thrilled that we, Family Jalin, support a story of Confederate bullheadedness in the face of all the Confederacy did wrong? Certainly not. There are people with whom I work that are from places outside of the traditional South, people that question my retelling of my Turkeyfoot heritage or my pride in having Confederate soldiers for ancestors. But how does one explain that I am not supporting slavery, whippings, the Klan (God forbid), Nadir conditions, sharecropping, or separate but equal? How am I supposed to tell my coworkers, my friends, who have never known rural life in all its isolation from the human truths—sharing the same slickened skin, regardless of color, and that we should care no more than death does what the outside of a person looks or feels like—found in cities through simple lack of room to run away from it? What am I to say when they find that I defend the South's right to be upset—we lost everything, everything, and have still not recovered—and they call me 'racist' or 'backward' or redneck'? I'm not sure I can explain to them what it is like, how being within arm's reach of my family is to be a pine tree, to feel your sap bleeding, seeping out down your bark, and you are powerless, and finally you watch as somebody you know and thought you could trust is taking away all of your sap, all of your tar, in nothing but a little metal bucket. And they don't even thank you. They just take your tar, that tar you produced all of your life and spend countless summers slurping at sunlight to make that tar and they use it for evil or at least for no good, for something you as a pine tree could not rightly support. In the Revolutionary War, you had to stand and take bullets while your tar, laid out by those selfsame people you thought you could trust, held Englishmen feet fast in river banks, and those errant bullets that sharply poked into your trunk were the same bullets that landed in those Englishmen's stomachs, potshots, and they, collapsing in the middle, would drown face down in three inches of river water if they did not bleed out first. And you remember moments like this: moments when you saw the river, striped red like a fast moving tiger, lap at your blood, your tar, too.

There is a disconnect for me between my brother's Turkeyfoot and my own—his Turkeyfoot is a vacuum. It is only one side of the story—a story of Confederate defiance. Nevertheless, Turkeyfoot

unifies us as it separates us. Without my father or mother, it is what we have left. It is our interstitial tissue. We tell each other this story about Turkeyfoot as if it means something about who we are, who we have become. How much is real history?

In the hospital, my father asked me to be the oak trunk holding together the limbs of the Jalin family. I will fail at this because I am a coward. I will sit in my lab in Charlotte, surrounded by human tissues mutilated and consumed by pesticides, cancer, horrors—other people’s families crumbling because of these small mutations in nameless cells. I feel it—I will be that nameless cell unless I can stop it. Unless I can find a way to fix.

Yossar

I say to Vance that there isn’t any sense in putting our dad in a public cemetery when we’ve got one of our own in the backyard. Maybe he doesn’t want to have to look at dad all the time now that he’s got Turkeyfoot. But when I tell him that, he just says hush, Yossar, hush. Because Jessup doesn’t know yet that dad gave Vance Turkeyfoot and not Jessup. And I know Vance wants it, that’s no surprise, he he don’t want to cause conflict. We both’ve seen what Jessup is capable of, and decided at that moment that neither of us wants any part of it. So we keep Jessup happy, simple as that.

We have two dead parents now and Vance won’t let them be buried in the family plot out back. They are in a funeral home and they look so good now they like to not be dead. That’s how good funeral homes are these days. I remember back when I started digging, sometimes it was like they just slapped some powder and lipstick on a corpse and popped it right in the box. Enough to scare a child, is what it was then.

Jessup said after our dad died to go ahead and dig the holes out back, so I did. Then there was me and Vance standing on the lip of two rectangle graves—they were good and straight, too, because I wanted to do the best I could if I was to put my own parents into a grave—and reading the names of our parents on the granite tombstones I got a discount on because I know the man who does them around here. Vance says to me, that’s not when Mom was born. That’s not her birthday. So I look at that glossed granite tombstone that stands half-sunk to the base in the wet soil and I guess he’s right. And

behind me, Jessup says, “Well Goddamnit, Yossar.” And well I guess that is my fault. Vance says it doesn’t matter anyway because no parent of his is getting buried in two feet of water, but that’s not my fault because I can’t help that we have a high water table. Jessup pumps his fists up and down, like a monkey in a zoo. Then Jessup says that as long as he is alive, Vance won’t be put in the burial plot, either—if it isn’t good enough for his parents. Vance says that’s okay with him, if that’s what it takes to make Jessup happy.

I saw that girl when she was dead—I saw her when she was alive and then when she was dead, too. I’ve seen a lot of dead people. When I saw my dad dead in the hospital, I wasn’t surprised by his eyes or the color of his skin. I knew that his fingernails and hair were still growing. When nobody was around, I took his stiff arm and moved his hand over his heart, just so it would stick and stay that way.

None of us say nothing. The crickets in the creek are so loud we can’t hear one another anyway. So Vance says that a grave like that is for peasants and that there is no dignity in a grave half-full of swamp water. Jessup, he says, dust to dust, Vance—put him where he understands what the soil is saying. Don’t put him in land he’s not familiar with. Vance says not here, not here. I guess Jessup doesn’t want to buy a plot since we already have one here and ready. I did the best I could but I can’t help the ground water.

There’s lots of dead people and then I put them in the ground and it’s like they weren’t even alive anymore. Maybe that’s not true, but dead people, they become nothing more than a slab of granite with a name on it and that’s it. Eventually, that’s all any of us are.

Vance says he’s going to buy two plots in the cemetery next to the cemetery where the girl is—they had two separate cemeteries when she died. I guess because people thought the different races shouldn’t mingle even after they was all dead. That’s going to leave two empty graves with no headstones to mark them and no bodies to fill them. The holes are so close that they could have pushed their arms through the dirt and touched one another. Maybe that’s why the cemeteries used to be two separate ones, so that nobody would be able to reach over and grab whoever was buried next to them.

Jessup

Sometimes I'll be listening to the news on TV or reading something in the newspaper and I'll see an article about a rich kid who divorces his parents or I'll see something about a mother who didn't know her son was a serial killer or maybe it'll be a different mother who kills her kid and then blames a generic black guy. And I guess that's how it goes with family. You just can't always see eye to eye. And sometimes it's not eye to eye that you're not seeing, sometimes you're staring at a nice burial plot and you've got all these nice plans together to put your parents under decently but there's that meddling brother of yours that never seems to think anything is good enough. Still—all things aside and considering how much he has had to adjust to his adverse situations living in Charlotte, as he does now, with no Turkeyfoot land to go and sit on doing nothing, as he used to do, and besides all of that, what with the ever-nagging (she's a hen-pecker, in truth) Brigget and both of those kids of his gone out of the house so that all he's left with is her voice pecking real live holes out of the walls, Vance is a decent guy. What I mean is, he's deserving of pity. All in all. I wouldn't of said this if he hadn't sucked it up and apologized. And besides, a man's got to know when to be bigger, when to forgive. Believe me, Family Jalin would be a total disaster without my efforts—we wouldn't know what was up, down, past, or present, if I didn't try so hard. That's the honest truth.

Vance pulls me over at our parent's funeral, the one over in town since our own backyard and family homestead wasn't apparently good enough for Vance:

"We've got to talk," he says. Wellup, I reckoned so. I figured on him coming around to say sorry for bolting out of the reunion.

"What is it, brother?" I ask. I tried on my professional voice so that he can see he's the one being childish and all.

"We've got to call a truce," he says. "Now's the best time."

"Wellup," I say. I'll be honest—I wasn't going to bring up the reunion or how he could support his family history by sponsoring the Battle Site. If it weren't for me trying so hard to preserve the Jalins,

I'd have just as soon cut him out of the family altogether. Tell him we don't have any more room, thanks, so we're going to have to lay him off, so to speak. But a man's got to forgive, as I said.

"I'm sorry I left," he says. "I should've been more patient."

I believe I almost fell over on top of a grave, seeing as how I had figured on an apology but not on an admission of fault.

"Wellup, I don't know that I'd be one to disagree, Vance," I say. "I suppose it's possible that your taking off went and broke Mom's heart so that she died and then when she died, I guess that just killed Dad, too. So."

"I want to make it up," he says.

"You plan on resurrecting them, Doctor?" I ask him.

"I have an idea how I can make it up."

"Oh, I can see it now," I say to him. "You'll be out here at night digging up their bodies in your white lab coat, just like it's a movie of some kind."

"It's for Turkeyfoot," he says. "I talked to Joy. We think it might help improve the place as an attraction."

"Joy, eh. What's your thought?" I ask. "Because maybe I won't be interested."

But what I was thinking was about how he didn't pay a lick of attention to the belt buckle of Willy's I found instead of pretending it didn't even belong to our family or how he let the place go to ruins or how he never offered to help Joy and Sable and I turn the place into a Battle Site instead of just a local tourist trap.

"What did you say to Joy?" I ask him. "Or what did she say to you?"

"I know it's not making money," he says. "You don't have sponsors."

And really, that was like a dagger. Like he didn't understand that I haven't even really opened the place up to the public and business projects like this one take time. Besides, didn't he know I did my research? It's not like I don't know how to fix it so this place will be successful. Just as successful as Cowgrove if not more. A man has to forgive, but that doesn't mean he still can't be a little mad.

“Joy had this idea,” he says. “That we could do a reenactment of the battle. Of Turkeyfoot. We could hire a reenactment group to come in. We could get the story together and tell the group what happened, and they can act it out.”

“So you want me to make money by spending it on a reenactment group?” I ask. “I don’t see what’s in it for me.”

“We can invite school kids, scholars, teachers,” he says. “I’ve got friends in Charlotte who are interested in the Civil War. We could latch on to some of the beach tourists. Maybe start a series of reenactments of Sherman’s March. I think Dad would like for us to do it together.”

“Wellup,” I say. Because I had this as my idea all along—a reenactment—I just hadn’t said anything about it yet. “I would bet you want to play Sherman, don’t you? My brother, general of the Yankee Army.”

“I want to help,” he says. “I want you to be successful.”

“Who’s paying the reenactors?” I ask. “I’m not footing that bill. I’m a land owner now.”

Because I am. Turkeyfoot is mine to do with what I want, now that our parents are dead.

“I’ll hire them,” he says. “You find them.”

“Well what is success but preparing and being lucky,” I state, not ask. “Let’s go ahead and do it.”

So with our parents not even turning sour in the grave yet, I’m planning that now, with a little help from Vance and Joy, which is good because it gets that death off their minds. That’s our next step—open the grounds next week and plan the reenactment. It’ll be in honor of our parents, because that’s what good sons do, they honor their parents. I can’t expect Vance to do it all, what with his pesticide job up in Charlotte. He’s in charge of the phone numbers and he provides the start up money—I can call and say, “Vance, we need some more lumber for the bleachers,” because I’m building them myself, and he says sure thing. Or he’ll just send a check. Which he’s done a couple of times, in various amounts. He attaches notes to the check, things like *For the fabric* or *Use at your discretion*. He says he’ll foot the hiring costs for a reenactment group if I find one that’s willing to take on the charge. I’ve got a mind to have Joy call up the folks over at Cowgrove, seeing as how they do regular reenactments. They know

who's more authentic than the other guys, and I bet they might could share their mailing lists. Joy is getting excited, too. I have a long telephone list for Sable—she's got plenty of calls to make, anyway, and I'd like her to get together more sponsorship money. Can't have too much cash laying around, what I say.

I've set the date for October—two and a half months. Mists will roll off the swamp, and like thick fog, it will wrap its fingers around the legs of the Union Army. Look—there is Sherman, astride a little horse. His face mirrors the haggard look of falling leaves. His outline is unkempt and his hat is tilted to the left. His men march around him in no particular formation and they work the ground like pointers laying upon any hidden grouse or pheasant that might make a nice meal. His men break out of the group and into homes where women scream and they laugh hoarse soldier laughs that are fastly soaked into the pine needle beds of the forest floor. As the men and Sherman advance along the Pee Dee River, they come to the branch of the Turkeyfoot and cross in the shallow water, the river reaching only the tongues of their boots. Now they come through the field (this is the back field), the tobacco leaves like cat-tongues across their pants legs (tobacco then is tall grass now). They see a house on the edge of the fields, and, again like hunting dogs but this time hounds, they pound across the field to ravage those who live within. But Lo! From around the house comes the North Carolina Militia, lead at this point by none other than Willy Jalin! There are only fifteen men in grey, but they rush bravely! On the porch stands Mom Cora, her daughter Bean but four years old, covering her eyes with her mother's apron—they say Bean never recovers from this moment, that she keeps her last name even after marrying, that the moment is like a muscle that she uses to force her husband to let her children take that Jalin name, too. Mom Cora has a shotgun in her hand, as well—nobody will enter her house. Battling ensues. Bayonets rip through tattered wool. Smoke fills the front yard so thick the men have trouble telling who is on whose side. But there are so many men in Blue! Willy has fallen at the steps of his own house. Surely he has died protecting his mother and sister. Cole keeps fighting—he has lost all but two of his men! Mom Cora has gone inside to grab a chicken, half-plucked. She whistles through her teeth—the men pause. Sherman is watching from the far edge of the tobacco field, his arm cocked like a gun on his hip,

just watching, just being mildly entertained. His horse, mistaking the whistle, nickers in response. Mom Cora holds the chicken above her—it hangs like a severed head. She says, “Come and get it!” and tosses the chicken into the crowd. Her bare forearms are striped in chicken blood and in each hand, she holds the chicken’s gaping head and a carving knife. The pack descends, devours. Cole manages to pull himself into the house on his elbows. He has been shot through the thigh, lanced with a saber in the arm, perhaps run through with a bayonet. He is bleeding badly and leaves a trail inside that these Union dogs could surely follow. This is truly a blood spoor. Mom Cora defends the door with her shotgun, but the Blues do not come—Uncle Billy beckons. He is the master of the hunt. The Blues bound across the fields into the brace of their leader.

Joy

July. The swamps shake and shift, and if the wind blows, it blows rotten air and the cicadas choke your ears when you sleep at night with the windows open. Gearing up for authenticity, my dad demands that my mother and I leave our windows open at night despite the heat. He says this prepares us for the reenactment, suffering without sleep, the sheets tangled around our ankles, listening to the screen in the window for any sign of wind. My mother begged him for the attic fan, at least, and he allowed it. It groans to life in the hallway every half hour or so as the vents widen and air roars upward. He says the reenactment will be held in October which, he believes, would reflect the authentic timeframe of Sherman’s March into North Carolina. He’s wrong, but I hate to kill his enthusiasm. As he tells me his plans, I try to keep him factual, accurate—I have to be careful, however, that he doesn’t get defensive. So I give him the important facts. Sherman’s men were followed by freed slaves, for example. Or that many of them had holes in their shoes. I explained that the PeeDee Indians led Sherman’s army through the swamps into North Carolina in the first place, just in case he wanted to stage any of this history, too.

I tell him if we’re going to do this right, we need to go over to Cowgrove and figure out the details. He says he’s done that, but I tell him we’ve got to go back again. Just in case he missed

something. I tell him we've got to actually talk to the people that work there, and so I set up an appointment with their head guide, Tim. I can't let him get embarrassed—I can't let him come off as ignorant or backwoods. This is our identity, our family history. We've got to get it right.

Yesterday, I got an email from one of my friends in the History Department, asking when I wanted to get together and discuss our findings. He said he had some problems with some of my research, that he questioned the authenticity of some of my sources. I had forgotten, what with Clint threatening departure, the disastrous reunion, and the death of my grandparents, that we were supposed to trade and comment on each other's research papers. I had his paper between the pages of a book of Civil War soldier's letters—when I opened the book, the spine cracked and several of the pages were still stiff against each other. I'm supposed to return to school at the end of August, exactly when my dad plans to start giving tours to the public. I've got the spiel memorized exactly as Vance told me to do it—he has the family history recorded.

We pull into Cowgrove after a drive during which my dad explains his final touches—renting a horse for whomever plays Sherman, stocking the cabin with chickens and vegetables, screenprinting T-shirts, bringing in television and newspaper reporters. We get out of the car onto pavement—their parking lot. Two men dressed in Revolutionary War uniforms wave to us from the entrance to the welcome center.

“That's something else we should try to get,” my dad says. “Greeters.”

The inside of the welcome center is dark. Spotlights shine into glass cases where muskets and tattered flags are pinned against the felt backdrop of the display cases. Cardboard cut outs of men and women lean against the walls with stories of their lives on small printed plaques nailed next to them. A woman in a bonnet and a calico dress approaches us from behind the welcome desk.

“Are you here for a tour?” she asks us. “Tours don't start here. They start out back by the cabins.”

“We're not here for a tour,” I say. “We're here to see Tim.”

“Tim’s on lunch,” the woman says. “You can go around and wait for him out back by the cabins.”

I nod at her and we go through heavy glass doors to a sitting area behind the welcome center. Across a patch of grass, a family with two small children wanders in and out of a series of cabins. Tents glimmer in the humid air beyond the cabins. I think I hear cows lowing.

“That was another idea I had,” my dad says. “Livestock.”

“There’s no money for that right now,” I say. That, and none of us are qualified to care for cattle.

“Long term plans,” he says. “You’ve got to think forward.”

“Exactly.”

After awhile, a man comes out of a cabin set off from the parking lot. He pushes through the heat waves toward us in a navy jacket with red trimming. His white pants are translucent from sweat by his knees. Brass buttons clatter against each other up and down his lapel. When he reaches us, my dad stands up and shakes his hand.

“This is an outfit,” my dad says. “Authentic.”

“They’re handmade by a woman in Pennsylvania,” he says. “An old neighbor of mine.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say. It comes out stilted. I feel my drawn out words clash against his stiff consonants. “Tim? Right?”

“You’re the Joy from the phone,” he says, smiling. “Interested in the reenactment.”

“We want to get it right,” I say.

“I completely understand,” Tim says. He nods, his hair moving up and down. I notice a purple mole just below his hairline.

“We’re looking to hire a group for the reenactment,” my dad says. “Some folks who know what they’re doing. Who do you suggest?”

“When do you want to do it?”

“October,” my dad says. “To keep it accurate.”

“He means to keep it doable. Not too hot,” I say. Tim smiles and nods again, his hair up and down.

“That’s when Sherman would come through with his army. We want to do a reenactment of the Battle of Turkeyfoot,” my dad says.

“What battle was that?” Tim asks.

“It’s more of a skirmish,” I say. I hear myself sounding fast, as if we are covering something up. I wonder if Tim thinks we’re suspicious or ignorant or in over our heads. Tim holds his eyes square on me. Nothing on his face shows me what he’s thinking.

“I’ve been doing a lot of research on Sherman and his involvement in the area,” I say. “It’s an area of interest for me.”

“I understand,” Tim says. He smiles. His teeth flash promises to me. “See this?” he asks, pulling back his jacket sleeve to show me a pocket watch fastened to his wrist with two straps of leather. “It’s a family heirloom. It doesn’t work anymore. Rumor has it that General Washington gave it to a relative of mine fighting in the Revolutionary War.”

“That just about beats our belt buckle, doesn’t it, Joy?” my dad says. “We’ve got this belt buckle that General Lee gave to my great granduncle, William Jalin—decorated for service, he was. Don’t that just beat all.”

I let that one slide, knowing as well as my dad that the belt buckle has no connection to General Lee.

“I would like to see that sometime,” Tim says. His watch reads two-thirty. The leather is cracked in places and stained deep brown from his sweat.

“What’s the story on this Battle of Turkeyfoot?” Tim asks me. “What can Cowgrove do to help you?”

“I’m not sure there’s a connection,” I say. Around us, a small group of beach tourists is gathering. Their flip flops slap the wood of the sitting area. A little girl complains to her mother about the heat. “This is Revolutionary. You all probably don’t deal too much with the Civil War.”

“Well, one was bloodier, that’s the truth,” my dad says. “Brother on brother, father on son. Such a shame.”

“Actually,” Tim projects his voice, turning his head as he does so to indicate to the small group that he’s imparting information they have paid to hear. “The Revolutionary War divided our people long before the Civil War split our nation. During this time, families held different allegiances—some members of a family called themselves Loyalists and supported the King. Others wanted independence—these were the Patriots. Indeed, many men were fighting their relatives, just as in the Civil War.”

“Of course,” I say. I nudge my elbow into my dad’s stomach. “Of course. Both wars were divisive.”

“All war is divisive,” Tim says. “War is certainly not unifying, is it?”

He lowers his voice to let us know he’s talking to just the two of us again. The tourists go back to checking their cellphones or picking at their sunburns.

“Are you looking to hire a group?” he asks. “Even if they are specialists of the Revolutionary War by nature?”

“I can guide the group,” I say. “I can train them and teach them the intricacies of the battle.”

“I’ve got a group on the side that I do Cowgrove reenactments with,” he says. “It’s not a problem for us to come over in October. We’re not that expensive. Not if you can supply the uniforms.”

“Not from your expensive Pennsylvania lady,” my dad says. “I can see the quality in that uniform.”

“That’s fine,” Tim says. “Look, I’ve got to go back to work. Joy, if you want to give me a call sometime, we can set up the details.”

“Here,” Tim says. He hands me a business card with two crossed sabers and a three-point hat embossed at the top. “Later works.”

In the car on our way back to Turkeyfoot, my dad says, “Did you hear his accent?”

Sharp letters, cold air, maybe mountains or desert or red billowing fields, snow falls in winter and dry heat in summer—yes. Yes.

“What was it?” I ask. “I guess I didn’t notice.”

“Yankees,” he says. “Get in the feel of it, Joy.”

“What?” I say. “So what?”

“Carpetbagger,” he says. “Coming in to ruin us all.”

For a moment, we are silent. The car hums beneath us. Then he laughs—cackles.

“I’m just joking, Joy,” he says. “There’s no more such thing as a carpetbagger. Don’t look so darn scared.”

Yossar

Jessup says yep they were soldiers, but then Vance says that hasn’t been proven yet. We’ve lost them all, anyway. All of our soldiers, I mean. Our Scotland folks? Lost to the English. Civil War? Lost that, too. Believe we had some Indian blood. I reckon it’s easy to count that as a loss. And so I says to Jessup, why do we want to keep playing back what we’ve lost, anyhow? But he mentions the wars that were won, that is the ones there were Jalins in. He says, what about the Revolutionary War? War of 1812? World War One? World War Two? Korea? Jessup is missing my point. It’s not the war that I care about. None of the Jalins have ever come *back* from the wars. I say that to him—I do, because that’s a loss if I’m counting. He says, wellup. I reckon you’re right, Yossar. But it’s a man’s right to die for his country. And I say, exactly. But what’s the point of remembering if the remembering is done just by the women? So then Jessup says we both know that women don’t always get spared neither. Which makes me hope to God he isn’t talking about that girl.

Jessup’s just going to show off our weaknesses with this reenactment. He says to me, Yossar, I expect that you’ll help with this. I don’t mind that, I say to him. What I mind is the story itself. That Jessup wants to make them soldiers. Which they weren’t. And I tell him that. That’s what my grandmother told me when he and Vance were out fighting all the time. To which he says, damn it Yossar let it go. Like I’m holding on too tight. Maybe too tight to the truth. So I say, just because they were holding guns don’t make them soldiers. He says, wellup, why not? And I say, remember that gun

of Vance's. You remember that. But that's when he stops talking, and that's when I know he knows I'm right. But he wouldn't say that. So I talk again, I say, sometimes I hold a gun. But that don't make me a soldier.

And besides all of that, what does Turkeyfoot need a reenactment for if the land itself is already reenacting those dyings every day you start to pay attention. Because the land suffered, too. The land itself had to miss Willy and Cole, or maybe it was Willy and Cole that missed the land too much. Whichever way it is, I know they never left it in the first place—Vance and me have seen them both: Willy and Cole. Ask Vance about it and he'll say no way. He don't believe in ghosts. We were out on the back pasture, me and Vance, in the morning once and the mist coming up from the swamp and standing like patches of men waist deep in the tall grass. And we were looking down mostly because Vance likes to see if any arrowheads or artifacts, as Jessup calls them, have come on up from the dirt yet. Because if they have, Vance takes them and stores them before Jessup can sell them off to a museum, which Sable and Joy don't know he does because they think he keeps whatever he finds for a future museum of their own right on Turkeyfoot. But he doesn't. Jessup takes them and sells them. He keeps the money for hisself. Vance hides the arrowheads—artifacts—in a shoebox in the backseat of his car. Which I don't think is right either. And I tell him. I tell him those belong to Turkeyfoot. But there we were, early in the morning, not looking out but looking down. Then I saw something. Just something on the edge of the field but it was taller than a standing man and it sort of shifted so I knew it wasn't solid.

“Vance,” I said. I didn't look at it. Something told me I didn't want to look at it, so I didn't. It shivered at the edge of what I could see. “Can you see it?”

“Is there one?” he asked. He must have thought I meant an arrowhead or some such thing.

“Can you *see* it?” I asked him. I didn't want to talk loud, neither. Like maybe if I whispered, whatever it was wouldn't see me there.

“Well, where is it?”

“*Look,*” I said. And then he did. Right at it. I knew he saw it, too, because he stopped so quick it was like he got caught half bending down. Then he tried to talk to it.

“Hey,” he said. The fog was like a big pillow so his voice maybe didn’t reach whatever it was, so he said it again. “Hey!”

I wasn’t going to look right at it. Because when it didn’t say something back to Vance, all of my skin pulled together like I was being pickled and I couldn’t stop from shaking. And if you’ve ever been in fog, you just know how quiet the world can be.

“This is private property,” Vance said. He was having to talk real loud to get his voice out of the fog. “You all can’t be here.”

But that something didn’t say nothing. That’s when I looked at it—I couldn’t help it anymore. I looked right at it. And it was the same color as the fog but like a patch of fog shaped just exactly as a man on a horse. Then I saw why he said “you all,” because right next to that man and horse was another fella. A littler patch of fog not on a horse.

“Is there something you all want, then? Well, what is it?” Vance yelled out.

“Vance,” I said. My hands were little shaking rabbits in my pockets. That man-shaped fog nudged the horse-shaped fog and the two of them fellas came across the grass to us. I mean came across—the grass didn’t even bend at the tips and it was tall grass, too. “That thing ain’t a man.”

“Hush, Yossar. What is it you want?” Vance asked again. His voice caught on the question mark, so I knew he must’ve been scared, too.

“It ain’t a man,” I said again. “You know what it is.”

“There’s no such thing,” he said. So I knew he knew what I was thinking. Because he had been thinking it, too.

“I bet you it’s Willy,” I said. I’ve been living with the ghost of that girl so long they don’t scare me anymore. I just get startled. That’s all ghosts do is come around and mess with you so they’re sure you haven’t forgotten about them yet.

“My God,” he said. “Look at it move.”

By then the man or fog or whatever it was on the horse was so close that we could see it had a face, and the horse did, too. Where a man would have eyes, this fog had two darker spots and looking

through them was like peeping through a hole in the wall and seeing a man getting hanged on the other side when what you thought you were going to see was circus or parade. Because now we could've put our arms through the fog, and that's exactly what Vance did. I guess he couldn't help himself but it was more than I ever care to do. He never stopped looking right at that thing's face, but his arms came up and he had his hands out, like he might go over and hug the horse's shoulder. Except when he should've hit flesh and bone, his arms and hands both went directly through the shoulder blade and the man's leg and then it was like a balloon had popped and there was nothing left in front of us but still air. Even the little fella was pop and gone, too.

"It was him," he said. He didn't look back right away and he had his arms up like he was still hugging that fog-horse's shoulder. "I could see it."

"You could see what, Vance? See what?" Because I am afraid of touching those things and now my brother had put his fool arms through it.

"I never thought I could be so cold," he said. But that didn't make me feel any better because this was May.

"What was it, Vance?"

"Blackness," he said.

And I never knew what to say after that. We stood there, not moving in that fog for hours until the sun came all the way up and the fog went back to the swamp except even then we didn't move. We just watched the edge of the field like maybe Willy would come back and take us with him.

Jessup says for me and Vance to go out back and scout for a good place to start the soldiers and the Sherman to marching, but when I say come on then Vance, he just shakes his head. I don't know but what and I tell him they aren't a danger. Maybe they can get on your nerves, but that girl in my kitchen's getting braver. Now she is coming up the steps at night and sometimes I hear her in my bedroom shuffling. I guess she's barefoot in death and why not. Every time I try to open up my eyes and catch a peak at her, though, she's pop and gone, just like Willy and Cole out on the pasture. When I say all this to Vance, he says what in the hell Yossar. Then Jessup says there's no girl in your house. And Vance

says we all made a pact to never talk about that again. Which is easy for them, I guess, because she's not slipping into their bedrooms at night, is she.

Clint

I was assigned to be Willy, but first Jessup says I have to get all of the vines and weeds cut out and that I have to get the tall grass shorter before we can have the reenactment. Jessup told me I would make the best Willy because I'm tall and Willy was nearly 6'1", which was very tall in the 1800s. He showed me a picture of Willy that was hanging in the Jalin Cabin, and he said we were spitting images. He used those words: "spitting images." Later, I took Trinnie back and showed her. She didn't think we looked alike at all. It was the nose, she said. My nose doesn't have a bump and it runs straight instead of blooming out at the bottom like Willy's did, like most of the Jalins' does. Trinnie asked if it was my mother's nose, but even I don't know that.

So in the days when I'm not being called out on digs, Jessup has me landscaping. Trinnie is helping me put in a vegetable garden next to the cabin. While Joy and my Aunt Sable stitched together uniforms for the soldiers, we brought over chickens that we bought at a feed store. Trinnie leaned into the galvanized tub and pulled out a handful of Rhode Island Reds, their little voices terrified, crying for the warmth of the heat lamp, for the soft bodies of their siblings. She pulled four of them to her shirt and cradled them—a mass of yellow feathers and gaping pink beaks and their little wrinkled feet scratching her arms—she said she'd never touched a chicken before. We brought them to Turkeyfoot in a box with holes poked out the top, they sleeping quiet against the heat of Trinnie's lap.

And when we got to Turkeyfoot, Trinnie set them aside while I built a coop—just five slabs of particle board with a flat roof and narrow chicken wire around it for a run. They pecked the ground behind the cabin as we dug round holes in the hard clay alongside the shaded walls of the cabin. Trinnie followed each hole I dug with a tomato plant or a pepper plant or basil, each of the root balls the size of her palms and I could take two or three into one hand. The stems, so fragile that I couldn't snap them if

they dropped, bent into the holes and the leaves wilted almost instantly and the black soil of their seedling youth looking trapped and foreign in the red clay.

“There’s no sun here,” Trinnie said. “They won’t grow.”

And in two weeks, she was right. The chickens were day by day plucked from the coop by hawks or cats or neighborhood dogs and we would come to work the landscape in the mornings only to find the feathered remnants of their little bodies or to not find their bodies at all. Day by day, too, the vegetable plants faded from blinding green to withered brown and the stems hardened and snapped. The beds lay yellow from dropped leaves. Kudzu from the creek crawled to the beds and soon we spent our mornings pulling fat root masses from the tilled garden clay. I imagined my hands half-buried in foreign soil. I wondered, for example, about heavy, hot Mississippi soil, wet to the touch and smelling of rot. Or I thought of Oklahoma—clay redder than Georgia’s, even, repelling moisture, clotting in my palms. I don’t know enough to imagine the soil of Oregon, of Willamette Valley—what must it look like, feel like, to draw men and families across barren Plains states, over mountains?

In the nights I’m sitting at the table, just inside the light cast from the kitchen lamp of my apartment. Trinnie bought me this atlas—a road map of the United States—and in the half-dark, I trace the lines of highways spreading out from North Carolina. I follow Old Fort out of the mountains, down into Tennessee. I go north, up along 77 until I hit Virginia, branching then along thin black highways that spread like small spider legs across the Blue Ridge Mountains. I try east, to the coast, along state highways until I trace myself into water and my fingers hit the Outerbanks. I never go south. I am tired of the hot, sweating ground, half-choked with groundwater and water moccasins in the lakes and the choked hollow noise of wind in pine trees.

I leave the atlas open on the table so that Trinnie and I eat cereal with it in the morning. We look at a different state every day. She says she’s seen the sand on the beaches of New Jersey nearly frozen. She says that snow gets thick enough to cover the tops of the grass. When I ask her if she’s seen other states, she describes Arizona—cactus forests so thick like trees, or Kansas—not flat but with hills like the

backs of sleeping coyotes, or California—more cars than I have ever seen, but she likes the redwoods, too. I want to know what the ground feels like frozen, what winter air sounds like.

As kids, Joy and I used to spin a globe at the elementary school. One of us would spin while the other held a finger on the edges of the globe, feeling the mountain ridges bump underneath as the globe whisked just barely pulling against the friction. When the globe stopped—that was where you were going to live when you grew up. Joy's finger would stop in exotic places, caught between mountain ranges in, say, Colorado or Spain. I was always in the ocean. Joy said it fit, statistically, so I shouldn't get down on myself. Most of the planet is made of ocean. And I would think, what does that mean for my future? Especially if I don't even like water?

And on the coffee table of my apartment, before we go to Turkeyfoot to help out Jessup, Trinnie flips through travel magazines and books, the pages humming through her finger tips and I can hear the TV, excited men or high-pitched women exclaiming to Trinnie which island of Hawaii was the best for snorkeling or what mountain to photograph first in the Himalayas or which cruise line offered the best seafood buffet—all of that noise just softer than the flapping books.

And over the TV and the pages turning, I say, "What about Peoria? Or Enid?" Because after breakfast, I write possibilities on a notepad. Different cities where I might fit.

The pages stop and she yells back, "No. Guam or Gulfito or Hamburg or even Victoria."

Because I know we are going—that's no longer the question I ask her in my bed at night, in that dark that can be so still and thick it's like having a third person in the room, standing over us but not speaking. Now, with our faces half-covered by blankets and submerged in pillows, I ask her—where? How far? Because I am ready to pull our roots out of this land—Trinnie her shallow grassy roots, shallow from the transplanting and the no-history of her family that did not care who came over first from where, and me. Me. I try to explain to her that she will have to pull me out of the soil here, that my roots go too deep and spread too far. And I am afraid that she will rip me out, like tearing my very feet and soul away from my body and I will have to wander and never transplant because of the damage. I will try to explain to her, try to tell her that a plant needs a like soil. That a plant needs to transition. I say, over

that TV and her flipping pages, that I can't just go. I'm still too afraid to pull my feet all the way out of the ground for fear I might never know what this place feels like again. That's when Trinnie says, "Then let's stay. Your family needs you, anyway."

And for what? To play Willy? Maybe they need me, but I don't need them.

"They're fine without us," I say. I'm always careful to say 'us', so she gets used to the sound of it.

"You have a wonderful cousin, a great mom—even if she isn't your real mom, and a dad that's just great," she says. Just like a Hallmark card.

"But I have an uncle who'd just as soon cut you as he would—"

"Every bunch has a bad apple," she says. "What are you going to do? Cut him out of the family? He's not so bad."

Except he is. He's just got his hooks into her where she can't see it.

"Okay," I say.

"Clint, he's paying us to do this landscaping work. Neither of us would have much of an income without that job. You make just a little more than I do burying the horses."

"He's not paying us," I start to say. "That's my Uncle Vance that's paying us."

"Please don't start that," she says. "Joy says he's harmless."

But I want it to work. I want to imagine the day after the reenactment. The boxes loaded in the trunk of my car and we've got a couple hundred dollars in our pockets from selling my used furniture, then we'll kiss everybody on the cheek and Vance will cut me a check for doing Willy and I'll feel good for that last act of family. As we drive off, we'll be like those little cactus spines you have to pull out after weeding—we'll just need a little tug to pull us free of Turkeyfoot.

Sable

It is August and Joy has said nothing about returning to the university. Jessup would like for us to keep the air conditioning off because he believes it will give us the authentic experience of the Civil

War era. I am merely hot and I suspect this is a money saving trick. He comes inside—he spends each day with a hammer and saw, repairing the cabin on his own—and says he would like more lemonade. He says he would like for me to sew together so many uniforms. Joy prints patterns off the internet and double checks them against her history books for accuracy. When Tim comes from Cowgrove, Joy leaves me alone at the sewing machine and I see them as they walk together in circles around the property. I have this machine set up in the dining room where Jessup’s parents spent their final months. The curtains are now washed and drawn. I have dusted, scrubbed, perfumed, and considered repainting, yet the smell of their dying seems to hang onto the walls. It seems to waft upward from the floorboards. Even with the window open, I cannot rid this room of their smell.

In the heat of the dining room, I cannot seem to follow time. I am sewing buttons by hand. I serve a breakfast of bacon and pancakes. Brigget appears to ask me if I would ever like to join her to have my hair cut. Joy says mother mother mother. I could be unloading boxes at her first apartment except that weight is the weight of my head resting on my forearms. Jessup holds samples of felt and wool before me—pick he says, don’t say cotton. A woman I do not recognize wears a bonnet. She asks me to milk the cows—we do not have any, I say. I hear rifles—no, that is the sound of Jessup’s nails driving into wood. No, that is the sound of the front door. The wind moves through the window like the voice of a ghost. The voice of an owl. Vance is saying hello hello hello.

Outside of the dining room, the air is thinner. I can breathe. I go to the door and step out to be with Vance on the front porch. He is alone.

“Are you alright?” he asks me. “You should sit down.”

“I have been in the dining room,” I say. “I have been sewing the outfits.”

“Sit,” he says, pushing soft on my backbone. I fall into a chair.

“The smell is so thick,” I say. A tear of sweat rolls from my forehead and across my cheekbones.

Vance smoothes it with his thumb.

“You’re working too hard,” he says.

“I am worried,” I say.

“About the reenactment? Don’t worry. I’ve got it under control.”

“Joy says nothing about returning to school,” I say. “Jessup promised me that the tour guide job would be simply a summer time employment opportunity. I have asked him when, and he says the tours will start when the grounds are ready. Joy has said that he would like for her to be the tour guide for the reenactment.”

“I’ve already paid her tuition,” he says. “Why would she not go back?”

I listen for the nails Jessup hits into the wood of the cabin. He cannot see us on the porch if he is working on the cabin.

“You are unannounced,” I say.

“No. I’m expected,” he says. “I’m here to see Jessup about media. He wants me to send down Brigget to give you a hand.”

“Vance,” I say. “Please.”

“That’s his decision,” he says. “You don’t have to tell me the problems with it.”

“Brigget?”

“She does the fundraising for some of our neighborhood improvement groups. She knows how to solicit money. I wish I could fix it for you, Sable.”

He reaches his hand to touch my face, as if we were just two teenagers on his father’s porch. We were that, once. I push his hand away from my cheek.

“Vance,” I say again.

“She doesn’t know,” he says. “This could be, Sable.”

My brother in law holds these aspirations. He met me on this same porch when Jessup first brought me home. This is what he wants.

“Go talk to him then,” I say. I stand up and back up toward the front door. “Go on.”

“Will you help her if I send her?” he asks. “She can bring in the local media.”

“Yes,” I say to him. I do not want to.

I sat on this porch with a basket of peaches and my fingers were so sticky and Jessup had peach juice on his lips so that when we kissed, I could feel our lips sticking together. Jessup, inside collecting his parents, left me alone on the porch with Vance. Vance, his grey eyes so flat and his voice like soft honesty and he said to me that he would love to have my time when his brother Jessup wasted it. He said, when, as if Jessup was a matter of time. Vance, who has never in my time knowing him said a nasty word to anyone. Vance, who has pulled me into thickets or rose gardens or simply around corners to profess his love for me since I first came to live in this flat land with Jessup. I do not know if he actively pretends that I am not yawning or if he simply cannot believe. However, as long as he will help me cut the chains that tie my daughter to this life, I will say whatever he would like to hear.

Joy

I sit on the picnic bench with his star chart in my lap, both of us looking up at the sky. Around us, Cowgrove hums the same words as Turkeyfoot at night—those crickets, whippoorwills, the last few cicadas cracking and singing on the tree trunks. I want to find Cepheus—four stars in a square with a point at the top. Tim says that’s an easy one to find, if the sky is dark enough. He says I might even be able to see that one when I go back to the university. His chart says it should be next to a cluster of seven little stars right at the end of his extended finger.

“See?” he says. I look up, and Tim points to the chart. “I don’t know how you don’t see. It’s there. Right there. By the cluster—under that trapezoid and above the bright one. It’s the quadrilateral.”

But I still can’t see it. Tim has his finger in the middle of the star chart, right on the point of Cepheus’ roof—beneath the chart, his finger pushes into the stitching on my jeans. His other hand presses against the hollow spaces of my ribs.

“Which ones are quadrilaterals?” I ask. “The ones with four corners or even sides?”

Tim doesn’t answer and although I’m holding my head so that my hair blocks him out of my peripheral, I can feel his breathing coming out and licking my cheek.

“This reminds me of a song,” he says. “We could live in Cepheus and have Leo as one of our cats.”

“Is it that one?” I ask. They all look the same—quadrilateral, trapezoidal, white. “You said you would show me which one it was. Then you have to show me Cygnus.”

We have been on the picnic table since the red light burned out on the horizon. All of the tourists, the other tour guides, and the gift shop employees have gotten in their cars and driven out down the highway hours ago. I’m supposed to be back at Turkeyfoot to help set up for tomorrow—the first day of guided tours. Yet, here I am on a picnic table at Cowgrove, the last remnants of heat working its way from the wood beneath us and Tim—his arm around me.

“Tree frogs,” Tim says. “I love to hear them singing. Hear them, Joy? Can you hear them singing?”

I feel the muscles in his arm tighten and he pushes his finger harder into the middle of the chart, the middle of my jeans. A part of me wants him to move that finger, or my thinking parts do because this is a foreigner, as my dad says, a carpetbagger, but then I feel my body sliding to him, rubbing my shoulders against his. He pushes the chart harder.

“See that Cepheus, Joy? See how we could live there together?”

And I can see it—Tim with a plate of bacon, me flipping pancakes. We could have a cat, a yellow stray that would sit on our kitchen countertops and Tim would feed it tuna from a can. Our bookshelves would be crowded with books about the Revolutionary War and about the Civil War and we would hold reenactments at Cowgrove and at Turkeyfoot, working together to show people and tourists living history. We could base the connections on the land, because the land remembers. We could explain, just like Tim has to me, how the Revolutionary War was so similar to the Civil War—families split between democracy and monarchy—how the South was divided then, too.

“Together—“ I say, like I might try it. Like it could be possible. “I found it!” I say, pushing those words at him. He backs off, looks at me. In the purple light, I can barely see his face. The replica brass medals on his Revolutionary War General’s jacket twitch like the stars.

“You found it,” he says. “Cepheus is the easy one.”

“Right there—it’s right there,” I say. I don’t know if that is true or not. Tim has been making constellations out of all the other useless stars for hours, but I can’t see the goat or the archer or even the house unless I first trace the outlines on his star chart. The drawings are stretching, in my opinion—one single star to represent the entire head of a bull, including horns, eyes, a tuft for a forelock.

“Let’s do Cygnus,” he says.

“I should go back,” I say. I’m only here to get the details straight, to figure out if the cost is going to work. Once we got prices and times finalized, I explained to him how the opening day is a couple of days away. He told me about Ohio, where he grew up down the street from the Sherman House—how that was the spark for him, too. There was the talking about being a tour guide. The questions—how he dresses in period war uniforms, how I couldn’t do that, the differences in our spiels, what kinds of tourists they get, and so on. And he would never have gotten me to the table except he started talking about the Southern Continental Army and rebellion and Tarleton. He said the troops could follow the stars and he would show me how. When he said “Patriot,” I thought “Confederate”: when he said “Loyalist,” I heard “Yankee.” Tarleton, he said, offered no quarter to those wanting to surrender—Tarleton, or “Benny,” he said, raided and burned and pillaged—a Viking loose in the Carolinas. And what I thought was, Sherman. Uncle Billy. Of course.

Because we can agree that Carolina has been punished. That she has been mutilated by plows, tarnished with thick blood of so many races, bled dry through her pine tree veins, and now lay blemished with the remnants of empty cabins half-swallowed by greedy kudzu. And every hundred years or so, just as soon as she was standing back on her feet again, a man would come along and burn her back down to roots, to dirt.

“Stay,” Tim says, “stay.” He that understands about history, about division and land and that tug of earth just like it was holding your hand as you walked along it—except I am afraid. Afraid because when I am next to him, I no longer feel the earth holding me: I only feel him. And without the earth to hold me, to comfort me, can I not lose my direction? Lose sight of my path?

I push my hands from the table and feel the dry dust welcome my feet back to the land. The stars follow me—they tilt, eyes like through keyholes as I back away from Tim, the table. That is Cepheus, over my head even as I'm walk away. The stars feel brighter and they spatter heat like cooking oil across my cheeks. I drop the chart in the wet grass and try to not think about stars or Tim or how the chart felt when it was on my lap.

"I have to go home," I say. I hold my hands before me, as if to push him away from my body should he try to follow. He looks at me, concerned, as I back away.

"Stay," he says. "There are so many more we could find."

But the stars are getting even closer, like they are ticks in my hair, little and bumpy and sucking something from me in their small teeth. Then it comes back—what Clint had said about going away, going in any direction just not south, and in my mind's ear, I can hear him saying, over and over, *wouldn't it be nice wouldn't it be nice*. And then, just through the blank darkness, Tim smiles at me with a face so open and it's like a promise. That's exactly what his face is: a promise. Because then I think: how easy. How easy it could be to pick up with Tim, to pull my feet out of Turkeyfoot, which feels like a grave all of a sudden anyway.

"Isn't it amazing, Joy?" Tim is saying. I can count his teeth in the dark, in that moon they are shining and the stars still feeling too close to the earth. "Isn't it amazing to think that these are the same stars our soldier ancestors looked at? That even the Indians and the maybe the prehistoric humans or the mammoths looked at?"

"Except parallax," I say. "That shift."

I stop moving backward, caught between wanting to run back to Turkeyfoot and needing that weight of Tim's hand on me.

"Parallax," Tim repeats. "Yes. The stars are always the same ones, but you're right. They shift. They move so we can't look directly at them and know where they are."

"It's only measurement," I say. The stars still feel like they crawl in my scalp, under my ears—the stars are close and spinning. "It's just to know distance. How far away we are. How far away—"

And that's what I think I'm saying, but the stars are so fast around me that I can't see Tim anymore, just the stars blurred to straight lines, just fast stripes spinning tornadic around my body. Through the motion I can barely hear Tim. He keeps saying *Joy Joy Joy* but I'm moving too fast then, too fast for my voice to answer or to see him coming to me or later holding me up or to even see the stars anymore because all I could see then was ground: the blades of grass reaching like little arms to me and the soft hushed whisper of the ground as if in the voice of my grandfather: *come down come down come down*. Except I never reach it. I hear it calling me and I never reach it.

Vance

When I was a child, a little boy in my class never wore shoes to school. His feet—I remember—were split and cracked, stained green near the ankles and rubbed the color of clay on his souls, all of this from the walking. His nail beds were clotted with dirt. I don't believe I ever saw his face clean except for one rainy day when the drops slid down his cheeks and forehead—I could see, then, that his face was grey, not unlike ashes left over from a fire. We walked by his house sometimes if we were going to swim in one of the ponds or if we wanted to go fishing. His father had a Confederate flag tacked onto the porch, and if we happened to be walking by at the same time as one of the boys who went to the other school, he would chant out that word. Just as if it was breathing to him. That little boy's father was injured in World War Two and he couldn't work, he couldn't walk. He sat on a rocking chair with a case of beer every morning and waited for folks to walk by on their way to work. I can still hear that word rattling in my ears—sometimes, if I'm driving by a black person, I hear that man's voice chanting. Chanting that word in my ears. I will not repeat it. I will not pretend that people use that word.

Why do I think of this moment now? Why do I remember the face of that man and not the face of his little boy? Brigget sits across from me, sipping coffee. The coffee slips out over the lip of the white cup. Her nails rap against the ceramic.

“Well?” she asks. She catches me staring.

“Nothing,” I say.

That same little boy went out with us to fish once—what was his name? I think it was Beau or Bobby. When we met that boy at the end of the block where he lived, none of my friends said a word to him. The boy had rips in the knees of his blue jeans. His eye was fat and purple, puffed so thick I could not tell what color his iris was. Jessup called him White Trash and asked him if his daddy beat him. I remember this—this, too, rattled in my ears. As if that boy were disposable, as if I could crumble him in my face and toss him into a trash can. Maybe I could throw him out of a window of a moving truck.

“You’re staring at me,” Brigget says. She turns a slick page of a catalogue, the tip of her finger slipping over images of cookery and hand-thrown pottery. She speaks without looking at me.

“I don’t mean to,” I say.

“What is it you want, Vance?” she asks, turns a page. Another. She reads the description of an iron that presses full table cloths. “Four thousand dollars,” she says. “I could use that.”

That little boy didn’t cry—I expected him to. He looked at the ground. I watched his fists curl and uncurl, curl and uncurl. Then Jessup said, “Are you hungry, Boy?” That little boy flashed his fist into Jessup’s eye and took him over. Jessup blocked his face with his forearms and screamed to my friends and I to pull this piece of white trash off him. He said that—this piece of white trash. Beneath the boy’s fists and the weight of that small body on his chest, Jessup laughed. A cackle, a giggle made of broken glass. We didn’t stop that little boy. Eventually, I suppose he got tired from the effort. He stood and helped Jessup up with one hand. They had matching black left eyes—I do not remember that little boy’s name or the exact contour of his face, yet those matching black eyes reaches me across decades. I remember that boy holding a catfish by its gills, one as long as his torso, carrying that beside him as its tailfin dragged in the dirt behind him.

“If you want something,” Brigget says, “then say so. Otherwise, stop staring at me.”

“I need you to go to Turkeyfoot,” I say.

“Oh, Vance,” she says. “What on earth for?”

“I need you to help Sable,” I say. “She needs help getting the media together. You could be of service to her in the fundraising area, too.”

“I’m not getting in a calico dress. I’m not wearing something that was in fashion over a hundred and fifty years ago.”

Later, when I was in high school, that boy had a girlfriend from the PeeDee tribe. He thought none of us knew about it, and since he didn’t have very many friends, he couldn’t know that we were watching him from our cars in the parking lot. He couldn’t know that we followed them out into the cotton fields at night, just to see what she looked like when she wasn’t wearing her school clothes. I wonder if his father ever knew about that girl. One night they went out and we didn’t follow them. I wish we would’ve. The next day in school, our teacher told us that boy had been found dead in a pond—the same pond we took him fishing to all those years before. No one around. Just his body floating in the pond. I think someone said his ankle had gotten caught in the pond weeds at the bottom. And that girl just left him there. Just left his body to float until the farmer found it the next morning.

“Vance,” Brigget says. “I’m not wearing anything like that. Let Sable wear it. She doesn’t care what she looks like, obviously.”

“You don’t have to wear an outfit,” I say. “I just need you to help her make and answer phone calls. You could help her in the gift shop, if you’re feeling generous.”

“How long?” she asks.

It’s so easy to think of yourself as that girl. Me, swimming with that boy. He gets his ankles caught, and it’s dark, but the moon catches in his frantic splashing. The moon waives, here Vance here. Here is where he is drowning. Would we be alone? Would we have other boys there? The other boys, if they were there, would remind me to toss a rock in before I save him—water moccasins swim in nests in this hot water. We knew of another girl killed because she jumped into the swamp one night without throwing in a rock to scare off the nest of moccasins. I don’t have time to throw in a rock. This boy is drowning. His splashing is less frantic, which means he is giving up. Water is filling his lungs. I dive down, untangle his ankles—the pond weeds are slick and don’t break easily. I uproot them, pull that boy to the surface. On the shore, he coughs water into my lap while I unwrap the pond weeds that cling red and fast to his ankles.

“Vance, good God, listen,” Brigget says. “Listen to me when I talk to you. How long?”

“A month, more, I guess,” I say.

“You want to send me to that filthy house for a month? No.”

“Please,” I say. “Sable needs your help.”

“No. I can’t do that place. It’s so godawful.”

“Can you do it for me?” I ask.

“Vance,” she whines.

“What do you want? What will it take?”

“Vance,” she says again. “I don’t know. A month?”

“Whatever you want,” I say. “I will buy you whatever you want. Do you want that table cloth iron?”

“I don’t want that,” she says.

“Do you want a new necklace? That one with the opals you liked?”

“Opals are boring,” she says. “I have a bunch of opals.”

“Can I just give you money, Brigget? I need this favor.”

“A month?” she says again. “A whole month at Turkeyfoot. You will owe me big time, Vance. Big time.”

I would have saved that boy, even though I no longer remember his face or his name. Does his PeeDee girlfriend still remember him? Does she think of what more she could do? If something like that had happened to a member of my family—Jemson, maybe, I would not forget. I would likely die from heartbreak, from the chanting of what could have been in my ears. That boy’s father never moved a muscle, even as his roof collapsed beneath fallen trees and his porch sagged and his windows gaped naked and screenless. If I were to drive by that house now where the boy lived, the flag would still hang from the porch. I have seen it—torn, faded. A corner appears eaten by erosion. If the wind catches it, however, it snaps, billows, resurrects the grandeur that flags are supposed to represent. Yet, the man is

dead. The boy is dead. I have no memory or recollection of his mother. Perhaps she, too, is dead. I wonder when the weather will finally take that flag back into the earth.

Sable

My house is becoming every day more filled with strangers and muddy footprints and yesterday, there was even a man in a blue wool outfit standing in front of my refrigerator eating sliced cheese. I do not know what the source of all of this Turkeyfoot Battle Site nonsense is. We have some facts, yes, but they do not support this as a real battle. After I found the man in the refrigerator, I went to the internet and typed in “battle”: a smaller engagement in a war with defined limits of force commitment, duration, and area. To me, a battle is two sides, many soldiers—this is the force commitment—a handful of officers, generals, and maybe a command from the head leaders of each side. I see lots of horses, cannons (during the Civil War, of course, but now maybe not—now I think many tanks and jeeps and armored cars). I also think about guns. So yes, these two Jalin boys had guns, according to Jessup and Vance’s story but not according to Yossar’s story, which I suppose makes them combatants. Still, I have to remind myself that simply being a combatant does not free a soldier from being but a boy—was this “battle” not simply a case of two boys simply fighting an army of boys? All of them boys except Sherman, who really should have known better than to send his men to shoot two young boys? To have a true battle, I believe you need some equality of men or at least some equality in numbers of men. Of course I understand that there can be “landslide” victories. I know that one side may have many many many more soldiers than the other side. But I ask myself about this Turkeyfoot Battle—can we call this a battle when we have just two potentially unarmed boys shot by an army of Union soldiers under the command of General Sherman? Is this a battle, because I think this is a murder. Only that.

We are not the only family to lose ancestors in the Civil War. The cemeteries of our Southern counties never had the land to offer a resting place for all of the soldiers that might have required one. In the mountains at night, sometimes my sisters and I would watch a green light flicker beneath the trees below us in the valley. My father said those were the ghosts of the Confederate dead who were never

returned to their families, searching for their graves. So many great-great-grandfathers are buried in ditches while their bones clatter against the bones of hundreds of other great-great-grandfathers. When these mass graves are excavated, the bones of a hundred men will have turned to dust and intermixed. All that will remain is a layer of bone dust, like a layer of hard clay. We have not lost great-great-grandfathers. We have lost two distant uncles. Two boys who never lived long enough to send forth their own line. These boys are lucky, too. They died at home, and so they were buried at home. I can touch their tombstones if I so choose because these boys are buried in the backyard. Is this true of the great-great-grandfathers' descendants? I say let the boys and their memory float and disperse at the bottom of their graves. Men are always looking for a "cause" to die for—let them die with that cause. Let that cause never be known again just in case it wants to take a few more young men with it.

Do I say to my husband, to my daughter or nephew, that I do not believe this was a battle? Do I say that I think this is only a murder of two boys, just like so many other murders of people like me from both sides, innocent bystanders who have not bystanded—who have in-the-way stood and paid with their lives? I do not say these things because I cannot say these things. I cannot break their hearts by letting them know that this reenactment, to me, is absurdity. Jessup and Vance say they are doing this reenactment in the name of family, in the name of their own dead father. Why must the living pay such a tribute to the dead? Why can we not simply let them alone?

So I spend my morning answering the phone, saying, "Thank you for calling the Turkeyfoot Battle Site. Would you like to buy tickets to our newest reenactment? The Battle of Turkeyfoot?" In between these phone calls, which happen rather infrequently, I pencil in answers to a crossword puzzle. There are little birds outside, Carolina chickadees, and they hop along the windowsill watching me with little black eyes. Around ten o'clock, the front door opens. Because of my orientation in the room, I cannot immediately see who is coming through—the door blocks the entrant from my sight—but I hear a humming. I hear a song, a tune with no true origin but compiled from hundreds of television theme songs and commercial jingles. I do not need to see to know that coming through my door is Brigget.

“He-llo!” she sings, her voice up then down. Once she is all the way in my living room, she points her fingers, little guns, at me and speaks, her voice still singing, again. “Guess who?”

“What a surprise,” I say. “How lovely to see you.”

“Vance sent me to help with the store and to help you sell tickets,” she says. “We’ll be working together right up until after the reenactment!”

I am not fooled by her excitement. She no more wants to work with me than I do with her. She sets down her bags—she has at least three, and they are decorated with designer fabrics and flashing buckles and saddlery leather. Earlier in the morning, I folded a stack of T-shirts Jessup ordered for the reenactment. He spent late night hours on the design, deciding lastly on a stand of cotton beneath two crossed rifles. On the morning he finished the design, he drank his coffee at the table with me, smiling, his fingers pulling on the edges of the paper that held the design. My Jessup is not an artist, and the design was not particularly innovative or artistic, but it suites our purposes. We only want commemorative shirts to sell to the tourists, and if making the design himself would bring Jessup some degree of happiness, I saw no need in telling him that the shirts looked childish and scribbled. Brigget goes to them immediately and unfolds them, leaving them in a heap of tangled white cotton.

“Who could possibly want to buy a T-shirt like this? Look, Sable,” she says, holding up one of the shirts. “Did you find a kid in town to draw this or something? It looks completely unprofessional.”

“They are fine,” I say. “They will do just fine.”

“No, no, I don’t think so. I’m having Vance take a look. He’ll want different shirts,” she says. Then she collects the heap of shirts in her arms and puts them back in the cardboard box from which they came. One hour of folding, undone.

Tomorrow is the opening day and I have not had one single visitor since we opened an hour ago. But with the reenactment still two weeks away, I am confronted by not only my dislike of calling this a “battle”, but now I must also work daily with Brigget. She is staying in our guest bedroom, as well. Charlotte, she says, is too far for her to commute back and forth. I think she is lying. I think Vance simply needs a break from her.

“How many tickets have you sold, Sable?” she asks me. She taps the call list in front of me—this is a list she has compiled herself of potential invites. “Not many?”

I have only crossed off the first fifteen. There are twenty-five names on a page and five pages.

“I have been sewing outfits,” I say.

“Tsk,” she says. “Tsk, tsk. Sable, when you solicit, you have to actually call people. Did you send out the brochures I made up?”

“Yes,” I say. Those were four hours of printing, folding, sealing, and labeling.

“Good, but you have to *call* those people. They don’t just show up,” she says. “Do you understand?”

“I have started,” I say. I point to the fifteen crossed-off names on her spreadsheet. “Some people have called me back.”

She puts her hands on her hips and stares at me for a moment, as if she is staring at a child. I am not a child.

“You know,” she says. She tilts her head. “I’m not sure you should man the phones anymore. I’m making an executive decision here. You’re off the phones.”

“Okay,” I say. I have more uniforms to sew together. I have to fashion a jacket for Jessup with buttons that need to be handsewn. I have to serge together a dress for myself and I have to create and place stains according to Joy’s historical predictions of clothing wear and tear.

“Don’t argue with me,” she says. “It’s not that you’re bad at it, it’s just that I’ll be better. Don’t take it so personally. You do want this to succeed, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I say. “Of course.”

“Good. We’ll do fine, then. Get up. I’m getting on the phones right now.”

I leave her to the phones and go upstairs to prepare our guest bedroom. Vance should have called me, and yet, he has not. I have no clean sheets and I must spend the rest of my day rewashing the sheets I used on the beds of my dying in-laws. Later, she comes into our bedroom at eleven in the night, long after Jessup has fallen asleep because he must wake early for the opening tomorrow. I have been in bed,

as well, but not sleeping. I have been counting the cracks on the plastered ceiling, following them with my eyes to the edges of the room and out of the windows. I hear her footsteps on the hardwood in the hallway and quietly rise from the bed so as not to awaken Jessup. We meet in the grey dark of the hallway.

“What?” I whisper. “What do you need?”

“It’s the sheets,” she says. She is not whispering. I can hear her voice from several feet away. In the room down the hall, Joy is also sleeping. “They aren’t very soft. They itch. Please put new ones on.”

“Right now?”

“It’s uncomfortable. I can’t sleep. I won’t be much help tomorrow if I don’t sleep, and besides, I would be grumpy.”

When my mother was alive, she pressed her sheets so that they crackled when you would pull them back. She said clean guest beds were a sign of good breeding and of hospitality. She also said that good breeding would not bend to poor breeding—she said, “Do not let those with poor breeding interfere with your good sense of manners.”

“Shall I change your sheets now?” I ask.

“I think that would be best,” Brigget says. She has her arms pulled around her body and in the darkness, she fakes a shiver. “And you might turn up the thermostat. It’s awfully cold in my room.”

And so now I am Brigget’s handmaiden, all so that she does not wake up Jessup and so that Vance is happy alone in his house in Charlotte. In the days, she undoes my work in the gift shop, not so that she can redo the work, but so that I can redo the work to her liking. I do not complain. How can I when Vance is funding so much of this project of Jessup’s? How can I when I hear my mother’s voice in my head, reminding me of my manners?

Brigget says she has been sent by Vance to help me prepare the house. She has not once lifted her hand to a vacuum or to a duster. The Civil War people come into the house in their uniforms that I have sewed in that hot dining room. The men come to my desk still smelling like work week cologne and handsoap, telling me how wonderful it is for them to take vacation time to educate tourists and elementary

school students on the actualities of American warfare. They ask me if they can use my restroom, which is down the hall to the kitchen, and then I will find them with their faces in my refrigerator or I will not catch them in the action and only see them leave with an apple or a handful of crackers. I do not complain. Jessup assures me that this reenactment will bring a profit to Turkeyfoot. This reenactment, he says, will make us successful.

Some of the men come to my desk and ask me if I can help them get the facts straight for the battle. There seems to be some confusion brewing, in fact. They want to know, what were the exact happenings? Who did what and where did they do that? I say to them that all of the information they should need has been prepared in the brochures Joy created two weeks ago. Then I direct them to Joy, because she wrote the brochures and she knows the story best of all—but do any of us really know?

I am also tired of the practicing. Every day, from eight in the morning until eight at night—that is how long they practice in the last week before the reenactment. There are too many men outside of my windows and they are in outfits that are inappropriate for the time period in which we are currently living. These men, they walk by in, for example, a grey Confederate uniform with holes poked open by my scissors and ketchup stains rubbed in to the fabric and I can see where the thread jammed and where I did not have the pants legs properly lined up. On some of them, I have not even trimmed the loose thread from the hems. One man came into my office with a hole on his shoulder I ripped so large that I could easily see he had a colored tattoo of a tiger underneath. I could not stop staring, because a tattoo such as that one would not be period-appropriate. He sees me staring and says, “The hole adds authenticity. I love it.” And in his voice, I hear how excited he must be to have me answer something like, well, yes, of course—isn’t history wonderful. What do I care about a hole? Clearly, I do not care.

Even into the evenings, I hear rifle fire. We are in the country, yes, and because of this location, I am accustomed to hearing the gunshots of hunters. This happens especially in the winter when the blasts find no foliage to suppress them. Such are the audio hazards of country living. Except now am I asked to deal with such fire in my own backyard. Still, I do not complain because it is not in my nature to do so.

When Jessup comes in at nights, he tells me that history is coming to life before my eyes. Just watch them line up, he says. Watch how authentically they shoot each other dead.

And besides all of this, the man, Tim, who is playing Sherman frightens me. Joy brought him over herself weeks ago to scout the back pasture. I watched them from my window in the kitchen. I watched him look around before nestling his hand in the small of her back. Imagine how surprised I was when she took her hand and put it on his back. Clearly, there was something going on between them. Once, I was walking a sandwich for Jessup back to where the men were practicing—I heard Joy and that man in the cabin. I will not repeat what they were doing, because it is not my place to say something. But if her father knew that she was with a man who would dare to play Sherman and a man from Ohio at that. If.

The man is uncommonly short, coming maybe to Joy's armpits, and although he is clearly an adult and therefore old enough to have a real sprouting of facial hair, nothing but thin duck fuzz exists on his upper lip. If this relationship continues, I am afraid I will have to step beyond my good breeding and say to her—no. This is not what you want. You do not want to fix yourself to a man without momentum. You do not want to wake up next to artifacts, rusted belt buckles, or a jar of marbles. You do not want to find that your real world is mending wool authentic war pants. Because moving to Cowgrove is a sideways move. She would only be moving sideways.

Jessup has his own complaints about this Sherman—Tim. He says a real Sherman would have the “unshaven” look—not a beard, but also not a smooth face. I say, maybe a real Sherman would have a face like my nephew, Clint's, but Jessup would not allow his blood relative to portray such a man.

And although I do not like to have these men dressed up in blue and grey uniforms marching all around my house, or Brigget unfolding Jessup's T-shirts, or the rifle fire with my morning coffee, I will have to agree that business will pick up now that Brigget makes the phone calls. Vance bought Joy a Turkeyfoot polo shirt for her tour guides, and he ordered several extras so that Brigget, Jessup, and I might wear them, too. We are unified and easily identifiable by the tourists now. Joy will lead these guests (Vance asks that we start calling the tourists “guests” because it makes us seem more welcoming)

around the back property and they will follow her with snap cameras and notepads. I will tell Jessup every time he comes in the door that we have succeeded, that we have finally met with success. I will say, look at all of them, and spread my arms the width of my kitchen window to hold all of the guests in the backyard. My Jessup, he will just says, jackpot.

Jessup

Opening day. Beautiful weather. Birds chirping and I hear the cars rolling in. That Brigget is a henpecker, but everybody's got to be good at something, don't they. She can bring them to us with that highpitched sugar-sweet voice. Guests flip through shirts in the front room. Joy has on her new embroidered polo shirt and she collects the first group of guests as I speak, right before my eyes. Just like a dream coming true I never even knew I dreamt in the first place. After Brigget and Sable sent the flyers out, they come in groups, stacked in vans and wearing matching T-shirts with high school mascots from cities as far away as Charlotte. I told Joy, I said give the same spiel to each group, for the sake of continuity. Then she says she's nervous. She's afraid she'll mess up in front of twenty people. Like maybe she'll forget to mention plaques in the ground or that the wooden planks on the cabin that I handsanded just like they would've been back in the Civil War. I tell her I'll go around with her first group, to give her support. What I don't tell her is that I've got to make sure she doesn't mess up. These tours are our practice runs for the reenactment.

Joy looks like a peanut standing in the middle of this first group. I count them—six kids, dads in sunglasses with their polo shirts tucked into their khakis, some moms in sundresses, and a couple of older guys out there on their own. I guess those would be Vance's Civil War buff buddies.

“Okay, everybody,” Joy starts. She waives her hands over her head to get their attention. One of the kids is crying. “Let's get started.”

Joy lays the groundwork for the story by explaining that the Jalin family has lived on this land since the 1700s. She name drops Bean, Mom Cora, Willy and Cole, explaining how they lived in the cabin out yonder and not in the house we live in now. Everybody is listening and nodding, and I set

myself off a little so as not to upset the group dynamic, so imagine my surprise when a guest in a flowered button-down, a woman with a mouth frozen in a question mark and spiked narrow hair the color of fog, asks Joy, “Was Bean a girl or a boy, anyway?” Because I thought we had covered that. I could have sworn that Joy had covered that.

Giving a spiel, the same thing to each group, that was my idea. Joy took a business class one semester while she was up at college, which I told her to do for the sake of my Turkeyfoot business model. I figured that way, when I got this place off the ground, she could help with the sales figures and charts and marketing. I guess that was before she couldn’t stop thinking about tanks and Sherman and who would find *her* bones in 10,000 years. Joy came back and said the professor said we only had to know one thing about marketing, and that one thing would make us rich. “Consistency,” Joy said, “is the most effective way to convert a product to memory.” So I sat down with her and we made our family history is a marketing ploy. We made the story digestible and entertaining, and when Joy wasn’t paying attention, I added a little bit of conflict and drama to the tale. Not much, but just enough to keep it exciting and rolling along. Just enough tweaked to keep the folks wanting more.

There’s a lot of folks to keep happy other than just the guests, too. When Clint starts acting sullen and he complained about having to work out in that garden pulling kudzu everyday—I offer him Willy. What does he say? He says he wants to be Sherman—no matter that we hired that historian, Tim, and he is going to be Sherman. No matter that the Jalin clan listening with dead ears just over there in the family plot would start to roll if a descendant of theirs put on a Sherman outfit and started marching over the land again. It’s an uphill battle to keep all the family members happy.

So here we are, me and the group of guests waiting for Joy to figure out how to think on her feet.

“Bean was a girl,” is what she says. “Mom Cora’s daughter.”

“I missed that,” the woman says. The man next to her writes something on his notepad.

Joy clears her throat and moves into the spiel:

“The year was 1865. The war was nearing an end and the South was starving. Sherman had crushed Savannah in the fall and offered her to Lincoln as a stocking stuffer at Christmas. Willy and Cole

Jalin, two brothers, lived here with their mother, known as Mom Cora, and their little sister, Bean. They lived here as bachelors after their father, Auter Jalin, left and joined up with the Confederate army in 1861—they received two letters from him in the first month, and then they never heard from Auter again. Mom Cora only knew of one letter: that one read: ‘On the field. Workin North. Be back when we got the cotton to get.’ The boys kept the second letter from Mom Cora and Bean. It read: ‘Wellup, aint comin back. Tell the boys bye and love to yall.’ As the story goes, Willy and Cole came up with the story that Auter had been captured during a daring raid on the Union Army and that he surely must have died in a prison camp since he never came home. In the later years of the war, Mom Cora received a letter from a man who had served with Auter Jalin. The letter describes how he was killed in action during the First Manassas—this artifact is currently on display in the cabin.”

Then Joy moves the group, ushering them in between her spread arms, so that we are all standing beside the old Jalin cabin. A little kid bends down and plays with the grass, so that’s one less person listening. I rub my hands together, just thinking of the souvenirs that kid might want to buy.

Joy goes on: “The boys couldn’t leave Turkeyfoot, not with her thinking her husband was dead and rotting on Northern soil and food being so scarce during war time. Historical accounts of women in the area alone at this time reflect the dangers of living without a man around: several women were burned in their houses by AWOL soldiers from both sides, two women were treated for gunshot wounds after trying to hunt rabbits for dinner, and another woman was crippled after being kicked in the leg by her husband’s mule. These newspaper accounts are on display inside—we will see them in a few moments. Mom Cora knew of these dangers and still encouraged her sons to join the army, but as historical accounts recall, they refused to leave her and Bean alone. Instead, the four worked together planting vegetables instead of cotton and tobacco, foraging for peaches and snatching strawberries from the rich neighbor’s fields. Cole engaged himself to the daughter of a blacksmith and worked in the forge for extra income. If you’ll look behind me, you’ll see the remnants of what was once a large tobacco field—this was Willy’s domain. Bean and Mom Cora bred chickens in the side yard and Willy spent his evenings with a shotgun on the porch fending off coyotes and marauding neighbors.”

At this point, I nod to Joy so that she'll give the guests about fifteen minutes to wander through the cabin and the side yard. We have a small flock of chickens, and from the corner of the porch, I watch the small children of the guests scattering the white-feathered clots of chickens from fence post to fence post in the yard. A child's small hand sends a bird tilted forward, wings up but not extended, its wrinkled yellow feet clawing for speed against the rough, dry dirt yard. Those fool birds. As soon as the kid can't keep up anymore, the chicken ducks and bobs its head against the yard, idling tut tuut tutting until threatened again.

"How am I doing so far?" Joy asks me. We lean our elbows against the porch railing while the guests wander in the cabin.

"You're doing alright," I say. "It's better that they go in and look at the artifacts now instead of after you tell them about the battle. We need the draft records for this to be just perfect."

"What should I do if they ask me about them?"

"Pretend we have them, I guess. Pretend we're processing them in Charlotte."

"Vance told me he never found any evidence that they were soldiers," she says. "No draft records."

"You'd rather listen to your uncle than your father? Is that what kind of daughter I raised?"

"Wouldn't this all be a lie if they weren't soldiers?" she asks.

"Go start the tour back up," is all I say. "Don't be rude by making them wait on you." Vance has been admittedly generous with his pocketbook, but to plant ideas in her head? That's just not what a family man should do, if you ask me.

When the guests would come out, Joy walks them back to the edge of the Turkeyfoot creek. They make a semicircle around her. The same kid who chased the chicken runs over to the cemetery and starts jumping on the graves.

"Okay, everybody," Joy starts. She's distracted by the kid. She looks over at him, then back at the group, then over at him again. The kid's mother must be some kind of dense. She never even seems to notice. Joy says:

“So, folks, on the morning of May 11, 1865, the two boys went out to find flowers for Mom Cora’s birthday. Willy said he had seen some lilies by the pines near the swamp, so they went to collect them for her table. Farm work and blacksmithing had worn heavily on the boys, and they slept so deep at night that neither of them had been keeping watch on the chickens. Each morning, one fewer would be clucking in the yard. While the boys were out, Mom Cora was sending Bean to catch what was then the last chicken left in the yard for a birthday dinner.

“Once the boys got to the edge of the swamp where Willy had seen the lilies, they could hear troops marching in—thunk, thunk, thunk, tha-tha-tha-thunk, thunk, thunk. They hid in the pines and watched as the foot soldiers went first, most of them drunk, stumbling. Their boots trampled the lilies. Some of them left scraps of paper or swatches of fabric in the grass behind the cotton stand. Cotton is a brittle plant—the stems caught on the soldiers’ uniforms. Imagine how they cried expletives at God, Cotton, the South, for each tear of cloth. And they were marching toward the house that stands behind us now.

“Both boys had community respect for being good kids, and they had honor if not money. They ran back—mostly through the neighbor’s tobacco fields, brushing through spiked sandpaper dry leaves like long, flat fingers on the ground. When they got to the house, they saw Mom Cora and Bean on the porch, and the Union Blues had formed a circle around them.

“‘Uncle Billy’ll get them!’ the ground chanted. A man came through the Blues on a big black horse, marked across its sides with long cuts in its flesh—Bean later intimated how the horse looked like a fighting dog with its deep cuts and mean teeth.

“‘If not now, then when?’ the man asked. Mom Cora had the plucked chicken in her hand. Its broken neck twisted loosely from its body. She had its feet, held it away from her chest.

“‘Could ask you the same question, Sir,’ she answered. She tucked Bean under her skirt folds. Behind the boys, thunderheads moved in and the pines shook in the echoes of thunder.

“‘We don’t wish you harm, Ma’am. But what would you have us eat? Woman, you are defeated,’ the man said. But this man was Sherman, and he didn’t just speak. He commanded. His voice

shook the pines, too—defiant of even the thunder itself. Can you imagine how loud his voice must have rumbled?”

Here, Joy puts up her palms and makes a scrunched up face at the small children, just like I told her to. All the little kids except for the one jumping on our graves squirm and grab at their mothers’ pants. If the group were all adults, I might have her leave that line out altogether. It’s got to be like theater, I’ve told her. You got to get them in to it.

Joy goes on: “No vegetables, no fruit. Four mouths to feed and one chicken—‘ she started, but Willy and Cole jumped up before she could finish. They pounced from the brush, unarmed, into the field of Union blues.

“‘It’s diseased!’ Cole yelled. ‘Take it! It died itself, just this morning!’

“Lightning popped behind them and globs of rain landed on the brim of Sherman’s hat. The crowd could see him laughing—his yellow teeth as long as the horse’s, both bared and long like the mouths of sharks.

“‘Just this morning. Just this very morning. Shoot the boys. Take the chicken. Leave the women or have them, if you wish,’ Sherman said.

“And the Blues did as Sherman commanded. Both Jalin boys died a soldier’s death, having planned on delivering the lilies as both a birthday gift and an apology gift to their mother—the cause had called them and they had signed up to fight that previous day. They died soldiers, you see, planning to protect and to serve as soldiers do. Unfortunately, our museum has been unable to locate the Jalin draft papers as of yet. Perhaps you noted in the cabin the framed newspaper account of the incident listing the names of the dead—this was a recent addition to our collection. Imagine the lilies as they were crushed in the hands of the dying Willy Jalin—his mouth forming the words, ‘I love you, Mother’ for his final breath. If you all return in the month of May, you will notice that we plant lilies around the cabin for Mom Cora’s birthday.

“Let’s move to the back sector of the creek now, where the Jalin family plot lies. Here we will see the final resting place for the Jalin brothers as well as for Mom Cora and Bean. A few decades back,

we planted Peace roses on the graves of the brothers and Purity roses on the graves of Mom Cora and Bean. Bean hardly spoke after Sherman's men left—she is my great-great-grandmother. After the incident, she had a child—a boy who she named Wilton Jalin after her two brothers.”

So she's not doing it quite right, but it's a start. It's alright for her first time. She gets on me about stretching history, but you've got to make a good story, do you not. I tell her, don't you get me wrong, I'd like to have those draft records to prove the story, too, but you can't always just have what would make life perfect. Things don't shake out that way. But I would feel better, too. If we could find those draft records that made Willy and Cole real-live soldiers. Because I don't know how long it's going to be before some smart ass brings up that the records have been getting processed for months or maybe that guy'll say how do you process paper draft records, exactly—I won't have an answer for that. If I could find those records, boy. I'd have a real gold mine here—a never-ending stream of folks lined up to see reenactments or to just tour the grounds. Then'd come the History Channel and the newspapers and the reporters. I could get so rich that I'd be able to sew together ten dollar bills as a blanket. And wouldn't that be something.

Joy

Before the sun comes up, a red line floats on the horizon toward the beach. Tim touches my cheek so that I look at him and not out the window. Last week was the first week of classes at my school. The leaves on the maples and dogwoods are still green and thick. They don't change until October, until the reenactment will be in full swing. In the cabin, we are beneath a store-bought quilt pulled up to our armpits.

“I want to hear your spiel again,” Tim says. I wish I could make him eggs or pancakes, but the cabin isn't furnished with real appliances. There's a woodburning stove, but I'm not sure if the top part of it ventilates through the roof or not.

“I gave it to you last night,” I say. That was the fourth, maybe fifth time I’ve given it. Tourists come in more and more each day. My dad says that is proof that Brigget is good for something, after all.

“I want to hear it again,” he says. “But with Vance’s research to defend it. Come on. It’s good practice. People will ask you questions.”

When Tim orchestrates the reenactments at Cowgrove, they have printed, recorded history to follow. Cowgrove has weight, bearing on history—the first successful American double-envelopment, large numbers of combatants on both sides. With us, the story is not easy. Nothing is certain—my spiel is the most public version of Turkeyfoot, but my dad and uncles can’t agree on so many of the actual events. What with us nearly a week into guided tours, my dad’s version seems to be winning. I have told this version to nearly a hundred late season beach-goers and their children.

“Some of the research is mine,” I say. I hear myself like a whisper in well. Like I have absolutely no backbone. I try again. “I’m pretty well informed on Sherman’s history, you know.”

“I know,” he says. “You’ve got a degree in history, too. We talked about that, remember?”

“Exactly,” I say. Because he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know there are professors, other students, seminars, books checked out, an apartment with now stale and cooped up furniture, and a wall covered in photocopies and print outs of General Sherman. He doesn’t know that graduation does not mean framed paper or gowns to me—this is my graduation. This is me living my degree. With every second I lay in this bed next to Tim, I am one second farther away from returning to the university.

“Since I’m starting to get my crew ready for practice, I just want to be sure it’s all defensible. It’s important to my crew that we’re reenacting history—real history,” Tim says.

“Are you suggesting something?”

“No, Joy, no,” he says. “I just want to make sure I can stand behind my team. If we aren’t the defenders of historical fact, then we’re just actors. We might as well do community theater or take our chances in Hollywood. You know?”

“This is fact,” I say. “The Battle of Turkeyfoot is fact. I’ve shown you the graves of Willy and Cole. That should be enough proof for you, Tim. I should think that would be enough.”

During the day time, Tim walks—no, strolls—around dressed like Sherman. He comes up to my groups and interrupts my spiel sometimes, demanding to be called “Uncle Billy.” When he does this, I tell him his behavior is disruptive and inauthentic. Because he is being nice. I tell him, Tim, Sherman wasn’t nice. After the groups, the soldiers, the wayward beach tourists go home, we sometimes sit in the cabin together, in the dark, and he tells me to call him “Uncle Billy,” too. I say it in these moments like I’m biting him, like calling him that is an attack. I sit on his stomach and bite that name into his chest.

“I would feel better if you’d let me see the research,” he says. He rolls away from me and sits up on the edge of the bed. The straw mattress shifts and crackles beneath his weight.

Sometimes, Tim and I sit next to each other on the worn wooden bench in front of the cabin, when I am in between groups—my last group usually weaving through racks of T-shirts in our living room, where my aunt and mother bag gifts and wrap coffee mugs in tissue paper. Before us, in the pasture grass, the reenactors will push bayonets into straw-filled dummy men. Some of them sit in the wet grass while they wait for their turns at the dummy men, passing tin cups from retail camping giants around and discussing the proper way to reload their guns, authentically. Every time, I expect them to sit in clots of like color, but blue jackets lean against grey ones and sometimes, they trade hats. When they stand, the seats of their pants are dampened to a dark grey or blue and they brush their palms down the backsides of their seats to loosen the bits of grass caught in the woven wool.

“Trust me on the research,” I say. “I wouldn’t put you into a situation where your crew would be at risk.”

Tim sits on the edge of the bed with his back to me for what feels like too long. Like he is doubting me. If this is true, I have no defense for myself. I am only following a story, retelling and regurgitating a story that my dad says Vance researched and developed. To be the best tour guide I can be, I put all other possibilities out of my mind—Yossar’s version, Sherman’s personal history, the tugging notion that Vance hasn’t been consulted on the story in months as it’s changed and twisted. Lead, explain, illuminate the history, repeat. Sometimes I imagine Sherman’s framed face on my walls in my apartment at the university, looking out that window in my direction. If he could see through the trees,

the soft hills, the cotton fields and into this window—if he could see what he’s being made to do. But these moments are weakness. I try to clear them with visions of burning houses, screaming women, and Sherman smiling like a demon.

“I don’t know, Joy,” he says.

“Tim, please,” I say. “I know it’s a relatively unknown battle. It’s not Cowgrove. We know that. Bear with us—I think it’s a story worth telling.”

Tim stands and begins to dress himself in the Sherman uniform my mother sewed for him.

“Are you leaving?” I ask.

“I’ve got to go,” he says. “My crew will start showing up soon.”

“Trust me,” I say. Maybe he shouldn’t. Maybe I don’t know what the truth is, either.

He wears his collar on his blue uniform unbuttoned, and from underneath his overcoat comes curled, sweat-thick hair—I remember his chest from the lemon-light of premorning, broad and holding the weight of my head when—after, our throats and voices rolling together with the humming of the tree frogs—there was just us and not speaking and robins in pine trees and the coarse hacking of blue jays. The cabin is ours—the bed, the “authentic 1860s strawticked mattress with a handcarved maple frame,” that is ours, too. And before we would rise, we imagine me in the kitchen of the cabin over the stove with a chicken in my hands, pulling the chicken’s feathers out of its tough-pocked skin in fistfuls as feathers downed and thick spiraled to the wood-slat floor. Then Tim would come in, his mud-splattered boots smudging field colors onto the white feathers. Tim blocking the door to the porch—behind him, we both imagining a blue army if I could duck him—Tim grabbing and tossing the limp chicken against the far wall, and me slamming fists stuffed with feathers against his chest as he would rub his stubbled-rough chin against my cheek. Tim then lifting me to his shoulder, my thigh knocking his hat to the floor—then the bed, the crack of shifting straw beneath us, his hairline topped with a large, purple mole like a fat tick.

Vance

I sent Brigget to Turkeyfoot and now spend my evenings spreading the word. In coffee shops, placed intermittent down concrete sidewalks that catch the fading sunlight, winking up at you with each forward step, each motion, I hold carefully chosen Civil War books above circle stained wooden tables and sip coffee from thick white mugs that leave smudged rings next to flyers for the First Annual Reproduction of the Battle of Turkeyfoot. If a person, say a woman in a turquoise skirt-suit or a man with carefully combed thinning hair, comes to sit in the booth benches lining the chipped paint walls of the noisy shops, I turn to him or her, admire their book or their mention a story on their newspaper. They, in turn, recognize that my table is stacked and fortified by books on Sherman's March or the Battle of Bull Run. I am asked if I am a scholar, a professor, perhaps a historian. As my response, I smile and ask, "Tell me, friend, what do you know about your heritage?"

Yet, I am mislabeled. I am thought to be a preacher. A beggar. Maybe they believe that I have pamphlets in my briefcase on The End. One man asks me how much he could pay me for my mouth to stop flapping. I only want to help. To inform. A land has a right to remember. A country has a right to know what formed it. I say this to another man—in a tweed, caverned lines on his face, slate-skinned—I ask him if he knows the history, the heritage of the state in which he lives. He says, yes, he is a geologist, but I should have seen that. I should have seen the dusting of rock and mica on his palms as he pulls the chair out and sits in front of me, uninvited, his lips forming granite, fault line, sediment. Instead of listening to his words, I watch him move. His hand sliding, slowlike, along the pocked wood of the coffee table. The left eye blinking fractions faster. The rhythmic tapping of his shoe beneath the table. Eventually, he notices. His eyebrows arch as he asks questions I do not hear. His sliding hand stops on the table, lips now forming hello hello hello. As he begins to leave, I push a Turkeyfoot flyer toward him and am not surprised when he does not take it. I am a failure, even in this.

The leaves on the crepe myrtles dry and fall. Jessup calls me daily about the reenactment, the actors, and the increase in tourism. "Whatever you're doing to get Brigget motivated," he says to me, "it's working." But so much of the time I am alone. There is a man who works in the lab with me—Gerald—who finds a stack of my Turkeyfoot flyers during our lunch hour. He is eating a tuna salad

sandwich as we sit across from one another in the break room. Gerald's family is from Charleston, and in the summers, he takes off several weeks to travel down with his wife and kids to stay at their beach house. He comes back and mentions the SOB's and the tourists, how the sand is not as soft as it used to be, or that the advertising airplanes are ruining the atmosphere. Although I do not usually speak with him unless we are discussing a sample, he claps me on my back after each trip and talks about the "old guard"—those of us left who have historical blood in the South.

Gerald sets down his sandwich and says, "Vance, what's this Turkeyfoot about?" He has found them on my bag and now flips one in the air—what else can I see it as but a waving white flag.

"A reenactment my brother's cooked up."

"We took the kids to Sumter this last summer—do you remember me telling you about that? We got a picture of the two of them on one of the cannons, like they were shooting out into the ocean. Smiles and all. Is this Turkeyfoot anything like Sumter?" He bites into the sandwich, the tendons in his jaws popping beneath his pushed brows.

"It's a Civil War reenactment—our family's involvement. My brother has a Battle Site," I say.

"What's the story?"

On the table before me my sandwich sits a perfect square—untouched. I cannot eat. Because we are not Charleston. Or soldiers—I am convinced of this now, after many nights searching online records. Or "old guard"—how do you explain to a man whose family reflects on lost columned mansions and acreage of cotton and their nostalgia of a bygone era where they didn't have to work to still reap a profit that you were lucky not to come from sharecroppers? That you were lucky not to be locked to the land not by steel but by dollars?

"There has to be a story, Vance," Gerald says. "I'll tell you ours if you tell me yours. Or is it you're clever enough to make me wait for the reenactment?"

Me thinking, yes of course. Cavalry or Captains while we were pot-shot off the back porch. I say nothing.

“Alright,” Gerald says. “I should be able to take a hint, but today I guess I can’t. Start by telling me the famous involved parties. That’s where the good stories start.”

“Sherman,” I say.

“‘Uncle Billy’,” he says. “Mine’s the General. You know—Robert E. Lee himself.”

Gerald sets down his sandwich again and watches my face for a reaction as he finishes chewing. I nearly hold my breath for being so still.

“The General. There was a flooded river. The rain had come for days and the foot soldiers plodded ankle-deep in mud because even the grass was coming up at the roots for all the water. My great-great-grandfather, Hoyt Corten, sits astride a horse, mounted next to the great General himself. They are surveying the river—they must travel now, because the river is near to boiling over and with it, it will pull down tents and men and mules and cannons. The water is the only force that can stop these—this is early in the war, and the South is winning. The General has a plan. The man is, of course, a genius, a gentleman, and the closest thing this country will ever have to being a king. He says he’s heard of men crossing rivers by holding on to the tails of their horses. The horses swim across, being stronger swimmers than the men. My great-great-grandfather, Hoyt, is appalled. He can’t let the General take a chance by crossing a river while holding the tail of a horse. But the General is a brave man. He is off the horse and thigh-deep in the river before Hoyt can stop him. Soon, all of the mounted officers are lined along the boiling banks, holding the tails of their horses in their trembling gloved hands. The General yells out, ‘Charge!’ and slaps Traveler on the haunches. You know Traveler, right?”

I say that I do—the white horse of Lee’s.

“You mean, the ‘General.’ Okay, good. So the General’s already in the river and the current is pulling Traveler and the General downstream and the waves are piling up over the saddle and Hoyt can just see the General’s head above the whitecaps. The officers are afraid, but they follow their brave leader into the river, holding the tails of their horses. Well, their horses are no Traveler—their horses are plunging and rearing and snorting and spinning because they aren’t getting in that swift river even if Traveler did it first. They are just saying ‘forget it’ to their officers. All except Hoyt’s horse. Hoyt’s

horse steps in as quiet as a mouse like the water isn't fretfully spinning under his hooves. Then Hoyt sees it: a snag, broke loose from the bank, riding down the waves toward the General's half-submerged head. And before he can yell out a warning, the General is hit and the snag is downstream. Traveler swims on and out, shaking himself on the far bank with his empty saddle. Hoyt, holding the tail of his own swimming horse, scans the bubbling water surface for the General—and finds him ten yards downstream. He lets go of his horse's tail and the current takes him, right to the General who is floating unconscious. So Hoyt grabs him and swims him over, patting him on the back until the General wakes up spitting water. Hoyt saved his life. That's the story."

"He saved General Lee," I say.

"Yes—he should've been decorated except we were running low on metals at the time, is my guess. So what happened with Sherman? Did you all take a shot at Sherman? Nearly kill him?"

"Sherman shot us," I say. I speak to my sandwich, picking at the hard edges of the roast beef between the bread. "He shot them both."

"Did you get a shot in at him? Did you make him pay or at least take out some of his soldiers?"

"There were only two of them," I say. "My great-great-granduncles. Gut shot by his soldiers while trying to protect the house."

"Well." Gerald takes another bite of his tuna salad and stares off above my head for a moment or two. "That's noble," he says after a minute. "Defending the house—lots of men died doing that. It was a big house, no doubt. A plantation? Right? Turkeyfoot Plantation—I might take my kids to see that."

"It's a cabin," I say. I could have said shack. I could have told him to think "dirt farmer" if he needs a visual image.

"Alright," he says.

"No columns or slave quarters or surreys."

"Alright," he says again. "So what's the attraction, again?"

I could have stopped this whole conversation from the get-go because I know. I know it already from the way his nails speak of books and silk shirts and country clubs and not of red clay and or

afternoons spent wrist-deep pulling vines and weed-choked banks. But at least we weren't sharecroppers. At least the land belonged to us as much as we did to it, and we would always have that. Even if nothing else, we would always have that.

Yossar

Sometimes I go out in the woods because I just get to feeling like she's watching me no matter where I'm sitting. Like she's got eyes that just go all over my body and through and through. I get to where I can't turn the TV up enough to make me not think about her. In the woods, it's just pine trees and houses where the people who used to live there couldn't afford to anymore. Now those houses don't have even any roads leading up to them. You could be walking in the woods and poof. There's a house.

Back when Jessup and me and Vance didn't have the problems we have now, there was this one time when Jessup and Vance and me went out one night and found a bunch of other folks playing poker in this rotten-framed house out behind a field off the main road. I was the one who'd found that house in the first place because I took walks in the woods then, too, but not because I was getting away from that girl. That girl wasn't dead yet when I first found that house. We were down in the bushes outside of this house watching the other folks flipping the cards, other girls on their laps making girl giggles and those girls had skirts so short we could see some of their thighs, which were real dark but still soft looking even though there wasn't more than a lantern sitting on the table for the other folks to see by. I was reminded of the kind of mud you might find on a river bed—something soft enough that your foot might fall into it like a cushion but not so soft that you'd just keep sinking.

“Who do they think they are? This is our poker joint, damn it,” my brother Jessup said. He pulled his lips back to hiss out his words and I could see the moon jumping across each of his teeth. “Those folks can't be in there. It's not right.”

This was a house built some time ago and hadn't anybody lived in it for as long as any of us could remember. Whoever had lived in it before must've moved fast because they left a table and some chairs and a sofa in the living room. Or maybe that house was somebody else's poker joint before it was

ours and maybe they brought in the table and chairs and sofa. Then it didn't matter who brought in the furniture because the other folks and their girls were in the house and we weren't.

"It's as much theirs as ours," Vance said.

"No, no it is not," Jessup said to him. They were right next to each other in the bushes and I was on the far side. We were all just looking in the window and every couple of minutes, the other folks laughed so hard I thought I could see even the leaves on the bushes shaking.

"We put a claim on it and by God it is more ours than it will ever be theirs," Jessup said. "We can take what we want. It's our right."

"We could find a different spot to play," Vance said. "That's no trouble at all. There's that other house, the one that woman who's kids all burnt up lived in after the fire."

"No, by God, no Vance. Those folks have no right to take what is ours."

Jessup looked over at me and his eyes were like to bounce right out of the sockets.

"Yossar," he said. My name smelled like whiskey coming out of his mouth. "We have got to do something. Follow me. Let's give them a real scare. Then they won't come back."

"Don't you do it, Jessup," Vance said. He was almost not-whispering. So loud I was afraid those other folks would hear him and what a ruckus that would be, if they knew we were out here watching them and their girls.

"Not us, Jessup. We don't do that sort of thing in our family," Vance said. But Jessup was already pulling himself out of the bushes on his belly and I didn't know but what else except to follow him.

"Damn it, not us, Jessup!" Vance said again. He was like a rabbit in the bushes and with a pointer on its tail.

When we got through the bushes, Jessup and me went up to the window of the house and there was just a pane of old glass on it so we stood quiet, one of us on each side of the frame hiding where those other folks couldn't see us. The other folks were carrying on and the outside edges of the table were so dark you couldn't see even where their heads ended and that darkness began. I could still hear

Vance in the bushes rattling on but from the window, he sounded just exactly like wind blowing dried leaves. So there wasn't a way those other folks would know we were out there.

Next thing that happened even jumped me at first, until I figured out that the pounding like bombs falling on all of our heads was Jessup, taking his fist and rolling away at the rotten wood of the house. He looked over at me, wild and his arms heavy in his shirt sleeves, and he made the word "GO" with his lips. So I pounded, too. Those other folks and their girls just about fell out of the chairs, and one of the girls did fall out of one of those folks' lap and she was on the ground screaming with her palms on her face. It started to smell like burning, but I couldn't see in since I was on the side of the frame, so I quit pounding. I was getting scared. Jessup didn't. He kept right on going. Maybe he didn't smell the burning. Then another noise came from behind us, a hooting like there was a ghost behind us or some such thing—the other folks heard it, too. So there was Vance coming up from the bushes, hollering about the lantern and I looked inside the house, and we could all see plain as day now because the table was overturned and the lantern was catching nearly everything inside on fire. The other folks were really screaming then—I've never seen anything burn so fast in all my life—and their girls were running out the other side of the house all except the girl on the floor because her dress was on fire and her thighs weren't the color of riverbed mud anymore. They were red like unfired clay and she wasn't moving at all. She was just exactly laying there like a clay sculpture waiting to be fired. Maybe she got too scared and fainted. I don't know. I looked over to say to Jessup we should go in and get her, but then I saw Jessup's back moving fast through the bushes, going away from the house. I could just hear the other folks and the girls screaming and crying her name, I guess, on the far side of the house and the fire came through the second story window snapping and the wood was moaning or maybe it was the other folks, too.

Just then there was Vance next to me at the open window.

"Why the hell don't you go in?" he asked me. "Why the hell don't you go get her while we have the chance?"

"You could go, too," I said. I was scared. I was.

Then Vance started beating his fists just like Jessup did, except he did it against the window panes. I did the same thing and we kept on until the glass broke out. My arms were bleeding but I couldn't feel them hurt. Inside I couldn't but just see that girl beneath her dress that was so hot and flaming it was burning itself right into her skin. Such a horrible sight I don't ever forget.

"Go now," Vance said. "I'll lift you in."

Vance lifted me up and over and I felt the broken glass on my leg then because it wasn't all broke out. It went real deep but I didn't notice that until later. Then I was in the house, right by that girl, but she was so hot I couldn't touch her. I would try to put my hand on her and it was just exactly like a stove. A wood stove, because then came down the rafters. One of them went just beside me and landed on her legs.

"Yossar," I could hear Vance yelling. Never in my life have I heard something so loud as fire. "Get out—you're going to die!"

So I bent down one more time and put my hand on her throat and tried to feel if her heart was beating, even though her skin made me feel just like fire myself. I swear to my grave I felt nothing. I would tell her that now, if she'd let me.

When I climbed back out, the fire was making his eyes hot, which I could see because they were getting wet. We couldn't see the girl in there anymore and nothing hadn't seemed at all real up until then.

"Oh, Jesus," was all I could think to say, because it was sort of a prayer. Like maybe she would rise up out of those flames and just climb out the window right next to us, but she didn't.

"We need to get out of here," Vance said. I couldn't hear if those other folks were screaming anymore or not. "The fire crew's going to be here soon. Come on."

Except I had that real deep cut in my leg. I could feel my shoe filling up with blood.

"Shit, Yossar," Vance said. He saw me looking at my leg. "Alright. It's alright."

Vance put my arm over his shoulder and we went out the way Jessup did, go through the trees as quiet as we could so those other folks would never see us and know we were there. All they would ever

know would be that some white man came up to the window hollering like an owl, but with the fire smoking, they never knew what his face looked like.

They had a funeral for that girl of theirs, but I didn't have to bury her because I didn't have contract at the funeral home the other folks used. I went to her cemetery once, with Vance, to say how we were sorry. Walking up to her tombstone, we counted—there were five crows watching us with their black eyes.

Vance and Jessup made up a story for me then, too—they were both too scared of what might happen to fight each other about who should've done what. They said I had to tell folks I got caught in a backhoe turn over. That was before they took me to the doctor. When the doctor looked at my leg and Vance said it was a backhoe turnover, the doctor just looked long and steady at my face. I had black smoke on all my face and my shirt smelled like house fire, too. That doctor said okay. That was all. Except he knew. He knew because how could he not. He wasn't going to say anything either because that's not how folks did things then.

When I walk through the woods now, I have to carry that leg more than the other one. That leg never healed right, so I carry it and remember how Vance and Jessup said don't you tell a soul. Sometimes I tell that girl if I hear her banging pots and pans. I don't know if she's heard me or not. I wonder if she'd leave me alone if I told somebody what happened that night, except having her around is like having a grasp on the truth. I pretend that girl is saying to me with each bang, say something say something. Tell somebody.

My two brothers tell lies. I guess I'd like to put a stop to it.

Joy

“Joy,” Tim says. My name floats out of his mouth and never hits his teeth. “I love doing this, being out and mixing around with people as much in love with history as we are, but I'm afraid I'm getting a bit confused.”

“Oh?” I say to Tim. He has his hand on mine and then he takes it away. I follow him as he walks along the back edge of the reenactors. My next group meets in half an hour.

The soldier-reenactors are switching—the blue group exchanges places with a group of grey coated soldiers my dad says are representing the North Carolina Militia. When he added the Militia to the story, I told him that I didn’t remember any militia involvement. He said that’s because I hadn’t read Vance’s family history report and he had. Still, I want to believe, but I have to believe that a skirmish between Sherman and the North Carolina Militia would’ve shown up in my research.

“Swap,” Tim calls out to his team. The group previously bayoneting sets down their guns on the soft sides of the creek and dip their hands in the slowish water. One of them walks in our direction with purpose while beyond, the grey coated soldiers shove their bayonets into the straw dummies.

“Prepare the tent layouts,” Tim calls over to him. “Take Hank with you.”

The man goes off. Tim rubs his fingers on his hat brim and sighs. In the last heat of summer, his hat stains a dark blue along the meeting of the brim and cap. If he turns his head a certain way and looks off, I am reminded of my Sherman portraits, of that distant lostness in the eyes. Maybe it was loneliness.

“I’m not getting the story straight,” he says.

“Which story?”

“Exactly, Joy.”

“Okay, which story?” I ask again, this time defensive. I feel my heart turning—not stopping, turning. Just shifting or twisting to a different position. I don’t picture that morning in the straw bed. I don’t think of him with his hand on my back. Like when the hurricanes roll up onto the mainland, I can see this storm coming.

“I’m supposed to lead the Union Army into this battle, and I don’t get the battle plan,” Tim says. “Like we talked about.”

Tim reaches for my hand and I cross my arms across my chest.

“Joy,” he says. His hand hangs extended between us.

“You, as Sherman, lead the soldiers into the pasture, up to the cabin, and then you confront my mother, as Mom Cora, about the chicken. Bang, you kill Clint, as Willy, and Jemson, as Cole. Then you lead the soldiers out,” I tell him. “Easy.”

Because even now, after the mornings and the late nights and all that I have learned about parallax and the Revolutionary War, he must not know how important this is, even if it isn't right. Vance spent hours on the phone with Jemson to get him to come down here. Clint, after much nagging from me and Trinnie both, decided to participate on the grounds that this would be his “last favor.” My mother is doing Mom Cora for the sake of the business, only. She thinks we are committing a travesty, dragging our own name through our own mud.

“Jessup mentioned a troop of Confederates,” Tim says. “He started with the Militia, and now he says he meant to say a troop of Confederates.”

“Yes,” I answer. “Willy and Cole.”

“Look. When we started doing reenactments at Cowgrove, we had all of this historical data. This woman, Janine, she spent weeks researching the battle plans, the topographical data, the costumes and foods and animals involved. If we had a question, we called Janine. She could answer it. And if she didn't have the exact answer, she at least could give us an answer informed by history.” Tim puts his forefinger on my arm and lets it tug against my hair.

“I don't want this to come out the wrong way,” he says. “But I wonder who the Janine is here. I mean, you have a lot of information, but Janine had a PhD. She had written a dissertation on the Double-Envelopment Strategies that helped to win the Battle of Cowgrove for the Continentals.”

“I gave you my spiel,” I say. “I've been to college and studied history.”

“That's another thing, Joy, but where did you get that spiel?” he says. “Yesterday, I walked into the house for a drink and I heard your mother on the phone talking about when you were going to go back to school. Is there something else you want to tell me?”

“I don't know what else you want from me.”

“Look. I want this to succeed, too, right?” Tim says. “I can recognize how important this is to you. But I care mostly about you. Tell me—what’s going on here?”

“You don’t, though, you don’t care,” I say. “You don’t have any idea even if you think you do because you don’t.”

I hear my words coming out and they sound childish for this kind of relationship—this is not the kind of relationship that has childish words or childish fights and nobody can rightly get up and storm out. That is not what this is. I keep telling myself that—I do.

“Let’s not fight, Joy,” Tim says. He lifts his fingers so that three of them now pull on my forearm. “Jessup says there was a whole troop of Confederates. More than just Willy and Cole. Tell me about that. Let me help to make this better. Just be honest with me. I won’t be angry.”

Except the notion of a whole troop of Confederates is brand-new to me, too. To my account, and to the consistent and verbatim spiel my dad has checked and double checked, the one that I give to each tourist to the site, the only Confederate Soldiers were Willy and Cole. And I can’t prove that—nobody has found the draft records. That’s just what he tells me to say, so I say it, for the sake of family history, propagation, and legacy.

“That’s what my father said,” I says. “A whole troop.”

And even if there hadn’t been a whole troop and without the draft records, Willy and Cole weren’t really soldiers, I get it. I understand what my dad is doing. Just as if Tim has snapped his fingers and the air clears out.

“A real battle has two sides. Frankly, Joy, I’m beginning to question whether or not we can reenact an *encounter*. Because that’s what this sounds like. To me.”

“No, no, no,” I say. “Don’t get worked up—I just misunderstood the question.”

“It’s the authenticity I’m beginning to question, too. I don’t think I believe in the Battle of Turkeyfoot,” Tim says. “Not as a battle, anyway. I’m sorry, Joy.”

I watch a soldier spear one of the straw dummies in the chest and lift it off the ground. The burlap arms whip around the soldier's head until the bayonet splits the burlap and the straw shakes out onto the grass.

"Alright," I say. I begin to check the corners and the nooks of the world around us—to see if there are witnesses, people who might challenge what I say to make him stop. But I have a way, an idea. "I am mistaken, then. Of course there was a troop of Confederates. Led by Cole Jalin."

"Jessup said it was Willy who led them. And that it was the North Carolina Militia. Then he said the Confederate troop."

"The charge was duel-led by both brothers," I say. I can no longer feel my heart twisting. I cannot feel it moving at all. "Anything else?"

"I haven't heard you mention that in your spiel."

"I change it," I say. "Depending on the mood of the group. You know that—how you have to play to the mood of the group."

"I try to keep my tours and reenactments authentic," Tim says.

"I can see that."

"Joy?" Tim says. We stop walking and he looks down at his authentic black general's boots. I polished those just the night before, in the cabin, while he kissed my neck and asked me to drawl my words when I talked to him and—

"Are you supposed to still be in school?" he asks. "I don't care if you are or not, I just thought you said you had a degree."

The soldier-reenactors are through and they begin milling in toward us, looking for direction from Tim. Some of them look drunk and hold their tin cups at odd angles to their fingers. Yes, authentic, I'm thinking. A small group of them wander over to the horse Trinnie found for us and rented for Tim to ride in on. They take turns trying to jump on its bare back from the ground. Tim hasn't even noticed them. One of the blue soldiers slides on his belly over the top of the quietly grazing horse. The men cough out together in a soldier's laugh while that blue soldier lies flat on his back beneath the horse's belly.

“I study Sherman,” I say. “Like I told you. Any other questions?”

“Yes—I talked to Yossar,” Tim says. “He came to see me in the back pasture. He walked right out of the woods and came up to me when my team was practicing the charge.”

“I’ll bet he confirmed Willy and Cole and the Militia.”

“He says they weren’t soldiers at all,” Tim says. “He says none of this is accurate. He said, ‘right,’ but I think he meant ‘accurate’.”

“Alright,” I say. “So you’ll give credibility to a man who lives alone and claims to see ghosts on the property. You’ll let him, a grave-digger who impregnates women he used to meet at funerals, get that last word in. But not me. Not me.”

“Don’t get upset, Joy,” Tim says. “This isn’t your fault. I’m having a decent time with you out here.”

“There are others you could confirm or unconfirm with. What did Clint say?” Because I hope at least Clint—

“He asked if I quit, could he be Sherman,” Tim says.

“Tim, tell me. What the hell else would they be?” My words thicken in my throat. I’m putting more pressure on them than I want to, but I can’t stop it.

Tim pulls his palms down his face.

“No, tell me. If they aren’t soldiers, then what the hell else would they be?” I say again.

Beyond, my dad pounds over to the soldier-reenactors messing with the horse. He has his hands on his hips, almost swishing through the grass like a child. We are too far to hear the words, but we can hear the coastal wind whip his heavy voice around the edges of the pasture. He comes to us in tones—questioning, then accusing.

“These stories,” Tim starts. He still has his palms on his mouth and his lips are catching in his fingers so that I can barely understand him. “I don’t think you realize what’s going on here.”

“Then you tell me, Tim,” I say. Except I do know—isn’t my dad just trying to embellish, to bring the *elements* of the story to life? Because it doesn’t matter anymore if it’s the truth or if it’s exact or if

anybody can trace it all back to the archives, just so long as we can show anybody who asks what it means to stand up against oppression. Against that bigger force that just pushes, just a little bit of pushing each day like a wind that leans on you but never knocks you down until next thing you know, you are on the edge of something dangerous and you hadn't even noticed you were being pushed from that safe spot in the first place. And that's what matters—that's what they have to remember when they leave. Don't let that force keep pushing.

“What is going on here?” I keep going. “If you think you know so well, then you tell me what's going on here.”

The day feels wet but never really gets there—the clouds puff up and turn grey in the face and I think every ten minutes that in ten more minutes, everybody will be wet. But sometimes on these grey days, the clouds split up, almost so you don't notice it, and a beam of light that you can actually see comes flying down to the earth. My mother used to say it was God, or Heaven, or maybe just St. Michael showing his face—I don't know why she always picked St. Michael. Just then, the clouds break open enough for a beam to come right down and land square on Tim's face. Suddenly, he looks like Sherman—the resemblance of a tall man on a short horse or a business tycoon unshaven in a wrinkled suit or a General with a woman's voice. And all I can think is, *Oh my God*. And I have been in bed with it. The soldier-reenactors have seen the light, too, and they form an arc around the cabin with my dad at the top point, all of them watching. I straighten my shoulders so that I stand square with him, although he still looks at his boots, so I flip his hat off his head to expose that naked, fat mole.

“I guess that's what's going on here,” I say. “I see it exactly. You want to ruin us—to make us look bad so that everybody will want to go to Cowgrove. And you thought I couldn't see it.”

Tim bends and returns his hat to cover the bareness of his head.

“You don't need to get upset,” he says, his voice coming out like cotton.

I try to keep my heart from twisting back the way it came—because don't I need to get upset? And maybe I shouldn't have knocked off his hat but that I needed to see that fat mole on his head again—

that one weak spot on his body that said ugly. That said look this is Sherman. This is the destroyer. Watch as he takes us down again.

“I’m going,” I say.

“Joy—wait. I do mean that I’m enjoying being out here with you,” he says. And I haven’t noticed before, but there are other moles—on his hands, his neck. They clutch to his skin like fat purple grapes, bubbling out of the wrinkles under his chin and on his wrists. The men around us, including my dad, shake their heads and scatter slowly, milling again in disinterest.

“Because we haven’t found the draft papers,” I say, already moving backward down the walkway to the cabin. “They’re somewhere in this state and we haven’t found them.”

“That doesn’t matter, Joy. I’m not going to say anything. I’ll work it out—will you let me work it out so that we can have two sides? I’ll work it out for you. Let me.”

And how stupid of me to let him do the things that we did—or that he did—all of that let’s dress up and I’ll be the lonely Sothern woman alone in the kitchen and all of that Sherman conquer me etc., etc., etc. How stupid of me. As if a lie would fix it all. Because I should’ve remembered what my dad says about family, about how nothing should be bigger than that.

“Joy, I’ll do Jessup’s version—that version makes it work. Wait.”

He says “wait” like a stepped-on bird.

“You should, because there’s only one version and it’s that one,” I say. “Do it because you had better. Because you made that verbal contract, did you not. You do it and if you want help with the orchestrating, you had better talk to Clint or my father and mother but just don’t you talk to Yossar or to me. And that’s that.”

I put my back to him and walk in the direction of my dad’s voice whipping at the soldier-reenactors again about the horse. Behind me, I can hear Tim chirp-chirping, a little broken-hearted bird on a rotting tree stump. My heart wants to twist, to feel, and I have to remind it what Tim was doing, how he is going to wreck us and save himself over at Cowgrove—how he thinks just about that reputation for

his team and preaches words like accuracy or authenticity or education. Because Tim isn't going to take us down again. I have this in control and Sherman is not going to take us down again.

Clint

I have always believed that this creek is the softest creek of any coming off the PeeDee, and by softest, I mean that the soil here isn't as sandy as it should be, especially as close as we are to the ocean. But I believe that is what really sets this place apart from the others, not the battle. I come down here now after finishing the side yard of the cabin and clear out the kudzu that wants to crawl across the creek. Jessup wants me to get rid of it all—he claims kudzu is inauthentic to the era. It's not so easy, spending your mornings wading in a creek bed, your jeans wet and stiff because that mud dries and pops off in clumps from your knees when you stand up for lunch. My hands, they're sliced through on the sides of my palms from pulling the rough vines from the clay and the leaves leak a sharp liquid into the cuts.

I've got it at bay for now, but the vines crawl at over a foot a day, if you can believe that. There's a lot to know about kudzu for anyone who cares. For example, it can consume a stand of pines or an abandoned house or a car stationary on cinder blocks—I've seen all of that with my own eyes. I have researched some of the methods to get rid of it and the best seems to be llamas, but when I mention this to Uncle Jessup, he asks me if I am slow. I don't know. I wanted him to have options, you know? A way to control the kudzu after Trinnie and I leave. And it wasn't easy to find that sort of information—this is a real problem and no one has a good way to address it yet. Yet another act in a string of ungratefulness, that's what I tell Trinnie. They're just trying to help, she tells me. But I say to Trinnie, well that's why I want to quit. Nobody appreciates it. This is in the grey hours of morning, before the birds or the cars on the roads outside or the soft humming coming through the walls of the neighbor woman as she irons her shirts in the morning. This is when Trinnie has her fingers on my arms and she traces the calluses across my palms and the soft butter of her skin soaks into my flesh—before the light comes up and I have to get up to pull more of the stretching kudzu out of the ground before the reenactment. I tell her, I try to, anyway, that I'm only doing this work as a last favor. After the reenactment, we are toast—through. Out.

If anybody, I guess I just want to help Joy before we leave, because it's not her fault she's convinced herself to get stuck.

So Jessup doesn't like the idea of llamas. Other encouraging methods of getting rid of kudzu could be burning (which I find dangerous when one lives on dry land, which we do), cutting off the root crowns (which can prove difficult given that some of these are the size of basketballs), and there's a fungus that kills the vines and not the trees underneath it. The only problem with that method is that the trees underneath it are already dead, seeing as how the kudzu has wrapped her viney fingers around the trees' necks and choked them to death. So the question remains, do we want land with dead trees with dead kudzu vines hanging down like a bridal veil or do we want our dead trees covered over so that they look almost like alive trees? And the problem is, I do not have the agricultural capacity yet to answer this question. I'd like to—that's my first plan when we settle out of the state. I'm going to study plants.

But I still like to get down in the creek bed and try, which is more than anybody else in the family is willing to do. Jessup says he's too busy with administrative work to help out with property improvement. Vance is the fundraiser. That's all. And my dad, he has separated himself from the whole reenactment—he says he doesn't believe. Joy and my aunts don't want to do the hard work because it tears up your hands, so they spend all of their free time sewing up costumes for the family. Joy has me set on being Willy and then her boyfriend is going to be Sherman and my cousin Jemson is supposed to be Cole, but I know Jemson isn't even coming down until the day before the reenactment, so I don't know how he's going to learn what to do and when to do it. I guess Tim does have the most experience with reenacting battles since he works over at Cowgrove, and I know that's why he gets to be Sherman, but still. To wear that general's hat, those crossed swords and the shining buttons? I want to say to Jessup, you know, maybe just once a Jalin should dress the part. Why do we always have to be the folks with dirt on our faces and uncut hair and frayed holes in our clothes? How can we expect to get ahead if we can't even look like we belong on the streets of even a small town? Trinnie says, say it. Stand up and pull yourself out by your bootstraps. I don't know. I guess it's hard for her to understand that the only way I see to pull myself up would be to leave the rest of them behind in the mud. And she's getting attached to

them, too. I guess because she never had a family that actually did things together. I don't know, maybe she dodged a bullet on that one.

These are the things I think about when I'm alone down in the creek bed, taking off root crowns so that the kudzu won't have a chance to eat the creek, the back pasture, and maybe all of the visitors, too. This one particular morning, I have just cut off a root crown as big as an orange and then here comes Joy, her face fat as a puffer fish and her eyes dripping and her nose red as clay.

She comes down the bank and stands over me with her arms crossed, like I'm supposed to just fill in the information for myself while she's not saying anything. When I don't say anything after a minute or two, she sits down next to me on on a pile of cut kudzu vines I have stacked up on the bank of the creek. She's obviously trying to not cry anymore, still huffing and sucking in air and not blinking like women do. Another thing women do that I learned from Trinnie: they always want you to guess what it is they're upset about in the first place, like they just can't come out and tell you on their own.

"Alright," I say to her. "What is it?"

I don't look at her. I learned from fights I had been having with Trinnie that if you look at them, they go all to bits and pieces again and you have to start over with what you were saying because you've lost them, once they start crying. I look instead at the orange-size root crown in my hand. It has four nodes coming off, which means the vine could have gone in four directions and made progress on four fronts. It's also smooth and twists like a rope. It's shaped a little oblong like a peanut, but the color is more like an acorn.

"I don't know," she says. "It's like I—" she starts, and her voice vibrates past me with the mayflies above the creek.

"What is it?" I say again, to keep her going.

"It's going to shit," she says, with her voice firming up.

"Who's it?" I ask her, trying to be funny but her mouth is one tight line driving over her chin.

“I don’t know whose is right. Maybe mine isn’t right. Maybe yours isn’t right. Vance says he won’t tell me what he has on file. He says it doesn’t matter because, he says, Jessup has the right version. He’s sure of it. But somebody is lying. More than one somebody is lying.”

“It’s like with the shotgun,” I say. “When your dad nearly blew his feet off because nobody knew who that shotgun belonged to.”

“And Tim—your dad told him that Willy and Cole weren’t soldiers. If they aren’t soldiers, then we don’t have a battle, which means that we don’t have a battle site, which means that we don’t have a past and who are we if we don’t have a past? Who?”

“Plus there’s the income,” I say. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that, okay, because it sure isn’t what she needs. But I’ve been thinking all of that, too. I’ve been down in the kudzu trying to keep my mouth shut where my dad couldn’t.

“The *income*?” Now her mouth is a black oval. A black oval with her tongue bouncing like a little snake at the bottom. Her thick eyebrows rub against each other on her forehead and she is mad. “What about you? What about your role, Clint? Spending all of that time with Trinnie instead of helping us out down here? You clear out some kudzu and act like you’ve worked as hard as the rest of us.”

“Please don’t you start on me,” I say. Joy can be a little like a pit bull or a retriever that’s supposed to get a duck and can’t find it. “I’m your friend, remember? I’m on your side.”

“You talk to me about income and then you talk to me about sides. All the while you dream about being Sherman. Why clear out the kudzu, why help at all if all you can dream about is razing us down like Sherman did?”

“It’s not what you’re thinking, why I want to be Sherman.”

“Burn us down. Go back to your dreams about running us into the ground and escaping to the North. Burn Atlanta on your way. Why not?”

“Slow down,” I say. “Remember what year it is, Joy. Come back on to the present.”

The root crown in my hand wiggled across my palm lines. Over up the creek bank, the soldiers clanked their bayonets together and I can just smell the gunpowder hot in the fall air. Her eyebrows split apart and she leans her hand over to my shoulder.

“I didn’t think this was how they would be,” she says. “I thought, maybe, this could pull us back together as a family. I thought we could use the past and create a future.”

And well, frankly, I’m surprised. Because she actually believes that our family would have a unified front. Because somehow, she has never seen that none of us have ever known for sure what went on when Sherman came through, and that some of us never even cared.

“Vance could do it with the timeline,” I say. “He could give us the closest thing to truth that we’ll ever get.”

And maybe, I find myself thinking, maybe she doesn’t even know that Vance just says he had that timeline authenticated by our grandfather the day before he died. None of us could verify that, either, is what my dad says. Because if my grandfather did verify it before he died, then why did Vance need to take it with him to the hospital the next day, too?

“Vance says nothing more than that Willy and Cole were shot, presumably by Sherman’s troops,” Joy says. “That’s all he’ll say, other than, ‘how much more money do you need?’ or ‘I’ve got more people signed up to come for the reenactment.’”

“We can pull this together,” I say.

“At least I can count on you to do Willy, can’t I? Because if you don’t—“

And this is the hard part, really. What Joy needs me to say is not what I say—because at some point, everybody’s got to stop being so careful with Joy. Her whole life, nobody wants to hurt Joy or disappoint Joy or tell Joy the truth because they think she’s fragile. Can’t she take disappointment like the rest of us? Because to me, all of this not-telling keeps Joy thinking that the family actually does need her, that she can’t do her own thing and go back to school like she’s supposed to because they might just fall to bits and pieces without her. Maybe it’s that I’m irritated about her talking me into being Willy in the reenactment that doesn’t matter a lick to me or maybe it’s that I’m truly trying to cut those shackles

off of Joy's ankles, but all of a sudden I'm hot and tired and needing to get out of the sticky close air of the creek bed.

So I say to her, and only because I'm upset for a reason I can't place yet:

"If you ask me, Joy, standing in front of Sherman's army after all that he had done to the rest of the South was a real stupid thing to do. I think, just maybe, that our ancestors deserved to die. They were getting in the way of history, and history isn't going to stop for a couple of underfed idealists. Think about it, really, as if they weren't our flesh and blood. Sherman comes up, his men hungry like any of us, asking for supper and what do they see but Big Momma's fat chicken pecking around the yard. So our great-great-great-whomevers make a fuss and get shot—what does this say about us? Really? Not that we are brave or noble or willing to stand up to something that we think is wrong. That's what it doesn't say."

Then Joy says, looking not at me but at a couple of kudzu leaves she's got in her hand, their bottom sides up so that the silver pops out in specks of sunlight coming down into the creekbed, she says, "Her name was Mom Cora."

And I have this sensation, coming up from just where my rib cage flattens in the middle, like I have something big and black and angry in my stomach crawling up to my throat. That angry thing chants to me: I do not belong here with these crazy people. They are, yes, crazy people who cannot live a second past 1865 and wasn't that long enough ago to stop remembering and to get on with it? And here is Joy, the "sensible" one, such as it might be, the one I tell Trinnie we should've had some hope for, other than me, of course, but Trinnie and I both know what's going to become of me and the both of us don't know what's going to become of Joy, especially not after I leave and her mother just gives up on pushing Joy out of the nest. So what, I pore my heart out to her about letting that memory, that dream of Uncle Jessup's go, and what does she say? She says, "Her name was Mom Cora." Which was my point, exactly. She has lost focus with the real world.

That big, black, angry thing in my throat says, This is too much. Act. Do. I still have that orange-sized root crown in my hand and so I throw it at a tree trunk. It pows into a maple on the far bank and bounces into a bed of pine needles, Joy just watching it fly right over her head. And you know, so

what? So what that the first thing that crown is going to do is set down roots where it lands and lo, the kudzu life cycle begins again. But I have to say something, and I have to try.

So I say: “Oh, who cares what her name was, Joy? I would tell you what: if I saw a fat roasting chicken and had been marching clear up from Georgia, liberating folks that deserved liberating after all, and me not having had nothing but flat biscuit meal or a potato, maybe, to eat, don’t you think I wouldn’t want it. Because I would. I would have taken that chicken, too. Mom Cora, she wouldn’t have known until she went out to get the chicken later on, and then wouldn’t nobody have been hurt.”

“They would not have been,” she says. Which I mistake for agreement, so I keep going.

“Except every story has to have the hero, right? Has to have the guy who’s going to stop a train or find the cure or let the bad folks take him hostage even when that doesn’t have to happen. Trying to stop Sherman, unarmed even, was simple suicide. Don’t jump in front of the bullet for a chicken. Jesus, Joy. Why didn’t they let it go and just go shoot a rabbit for dinner?”

Joy just sits there. She doesn’t move or say anything or I don’t think she even breathes for a minute.

Then: “Don’t you feel any sympathy for the oppressed, Clint? Can’t you understand how it feels to be held down?”

And I think, oh good Lord. It’s like the girl has plumb forgot Slavery. Plumb forgot that before that, our family got the land because we took it first from the folks that had been living there for thousands of years before that—the PeeDees. I should hope that she can see oppression growing up in an environment like this. I remember, when we were both children, Aunt Sable would put Joy and me in a red wagon and roll us around the edges of town: down to the Baptist church and the Methodist church and the old hardware store that closed four decades before, over the railroad tracks to the cotton gin and the puffs of unginning cotton caught in the wire fence and the tracks of dogs and raccoons and feral cats in the sandsoil where the tobacco fields start, alongside the swamp road with the grating of the tree frogs on one side and the unpainted houses with locust trees growing up through the tops of the caved-in roofs and the tarpapered windows, and back up on the street that went through the smallest houses in town with little

yellow mongrel dogs under the porches and adults sitting around at all hours of the day in nylon folding chairs asking Aunt Sable when she went by if she didn't need some work done on her house because they'd be happy to do it. And I remember when one of the children had come up so close to our wagon just to touch it, he said that he could see himself in it, but when I said, well then, get in, he said he had meant he could see his reflection in it. He said he hadn't never seen something so shiny and red in all his life. And when I told my dad about this later, when he got done with work, he said, let's go on over there and give that boy your wagon—I had one, too. That's what we did. We gave that boy my wagon.

I guess because I haven't said anything, Joy says to speak over the gunshots and bayonets of the reenactors over by the cabin, "You're still going to do Willy?"

"I'm still planning on it," I say.

"Not Sherman?"

"That's Tim, I thought."

"I think he's going to call it off," Joy says.

"For what reason?"

She pushes her bangs out of her face and looks off to the left. I know what will come next is a lie.

"Authenticity," she says. "He can't get the story straight. He says everybody's telling him something else."

Joy puts her hand into her hair and pushes it again so that the midday sunlight comes through the pines and catches it.

"You know where he works," I say.

"Yes."

"Don't you think it's possible that he wants to sabotage us?"

"You don't know the circumstances of that like I do," she says.

"That's probably true," I say, thinking of those mornings when I've been in the creek bed trimming kudzu, just out of sight because of the pine trees and the ditch, and how Joy would have Tim's

hand and she would be dragging him to the back door of the cabin while he checked over his shoulders and glanced twice as much toward the house like a man being followed. Then coming through the fog and thick air and pine needles, the sounds of them, together. Tangled, thuds, their voices caught up and mixing in the bedroom of the cabin then rolling out to the creek bed where I would be, trying not to hear it. Because that isn't any of my business.

“Why can't he work for us and for Cowgrove?” she says. “Is that too far out of your reach?”

“He's not what you want, Joy,” I say. I keep my voice like the slow water in the creek, just a hushed stream of words that maybe doesn't have any meaning at all.

“We share the same interests,” she says.

“That's not the same as love.”

“You're the one that told me to find a boyfriend, so I did. He could work for both—he does. He helps with this reenactment, then some more, then Cowgrove and Turkeyfoot could just work together.”

“You're a smart girl, Joy,” I say. “You know what's good for you.”

But you know, maybe she doesn't. Maybe it's just me that knows what's good for her.

“It has to work,” she says. “There's too much that will fall apart if it doesn't.”

“I'll give you mornings in the cabin,” I say to the clay beneath us. “But a life with Tim? Is that what you imagine for yourself? Stuck here in the Sandhills? Imagine that, Joy. Imagine living like my dad, for example, or your dad. Your nails never clean. Your hair smelling forever like you spent all morning mowing a lawn. Nobody thinking that you have a chance or a nice pair of shoes or half a thought in your head that doesn't start with ‘wellup’.”

“You think I should quit and go back to school?”

We both get quiet after she says that. She faces off west for a minute and I get to thinking that maybe she is imagining life outside of the Sandhills like I asked her to.

“I guess that's what I'd like to see you do,” I say.

“You'll be there,” she asks after a while. “At the reenactment.”

“Unless I can’t be,” I say to her, which I say in a kidding voice to cheer her up. She just snorts and stands up, brushing off the seat of her pants as she straightens.

“Remember,” she says. “Family is something you can count on.”

She says this with her hands on her hip bones like my Aunt Sable used to do when I was in trouble as a kid. In fact, I do feel a little in trouble.

“Then count seven days,” I say, “and I’ll be there.”

And you know, I don’t think she has any idea about the real Turkeyfoot. And I don’t mean the Turkeyfoot Battle, because, as I said before, that means absolutely nothing to me, and when you count back the generations, Joy and I are removed four generations from that event. I’m not sure Joy has considered this distance—and it is undeniable that the distance is considerable. Our blood is so diluted from those Jalins that we are like a grafted cherry branch on a maple trunk. Hardly the same at all except that we’re both a sort of tree and we can tolerate the same climate. What I do mean is the *real* Turkeyfoot—the cotton caught in the grass, the robins hopping over my head from limb to limb, the way the leaves rustle like a far-off crowd of people cheering when the coastal wind comes through. Because it’s the land that remains, not the people. Not even when they are locked underneath it in quiet death, not anymore.

The reenactment soldiers begin a mock battle behind Joy on the pasture above us. There are two lines of grey and blue stepping into a stretch of pasture foggy with fake-gunshot smoke. I feel like, at this moment, I am looking at Joy how she wants to be seen: gunshots, smoke, men in battle outfits, and her eyes snarling defiance in front of it all, challenging Sherman to come and try to take her down. And I think, this is what Joy wants, this is who she is. She is like those Civil War women who chop their own wood and hunt for rabbits and strap themselves into the plow harness to drive the mule and don’t you even try to get by her because she will fight you like a wildcat. It is like watching her blood pumping to her heart or seeing the air pull into her lungs. Then her eyes settle and she climbs up the bank, normal Joy again.

“I’ll be there for the battle, I say to fill that stillness of two people not-talking. “You can count on me.”

Yossar

I feel good. Right. Like I’ve done something I can be proud of. I walked right out of the woods and up to Tim, that fellow playing Sherman and I said, they’ve got it all wrong. He asked, soldiers? And I said, you better bet not. No shame in telling, I say. Once in a while, a man’s got to stretch his knees and really stand up. That reenactment is tomorrow. I can’t stop that, that’s true, but now I can tell that girl I said something. Now when she bangs my pots, I’ll be able to call an answer to her in the dark.

Jessup and me don’t agree on soldiering or dying. Because he’s not the one putting people in the grave, firstly. That’s me that’s been doing that all my God given life. And secondly, he wants to know what I think I know, because he don’t think that’s much of anything. There’s things I know, things I could show Clint that Jessup can’t never know. Jessup won’t know how it looks to put a soldier in the grave. They have this long flag that covers the box. That flag means, yes, this person has for sure died for their country—don’t you see that flag? The flag is proof. And I know for a fact that our kin had no flag. When I say this to Jessup, he says that’s before they gave out flags. Don’t matter. The flag makes a soldier.

Other things that make a soldier could be enlisting, but that’s some worms I don’t want to open with Jessup. Those worms make Jessup say they just haven’t found the draft record yet. Maybe because there isn’t one, I say. But he says there are draft records, because without the draft records, he can’t go on giving reenactments or tours forever. Someone will find out. Maybe I’ll tell people it’s because there aren’t any records. Maybe I’ll give that secret to more people than just Tim. Also salutes make a soldier—that’s something else I showed Clint. And Jessup says well a good soldier dies for his country like our folks did. But that ain’t right, either. They died for a dead country so what does that make them? And Jessup says the South isn’t dead, Yossar. It isn’t dead. Well, that’s just like when I watch those TV movies in the dark with just those framed portraits on my walls and that girl in my kitchen for company

and the actor on the TV bangs his fists on a dead person's chest and keeps saying you can't be dead you can't be dead come back! But they don't come back because that wouldn't never happen in real life.

And here is where Jessup doesn't get the dying part of life. Because when you're dead, you don't care—I tell him that. You don't care so much that you don't make a peep when the dirt comes over your box and your insides aren't even yours anymore because they are made out of chemicals like those that come through each hour on the train. And you don't care when you see the hole that waits for you—it's only the people that are still alive that get upset about that hole because they can still care whether or not they get put in it. Dead folks are the same as dead animals. Dead animals and dead folks are the same as dead countries. Maybe they matter to the people still around, but if those people still around quit remembering who or what went into those holes, do you think the dead things would care? Not a lick, I say. They would not care a single lick.

Funny that I think about this as I drive through the part of town where that girl's friends and relatives live. That's the other side of the railroad tracks. You might think things moved along further than that since the sixties, but you wouldn't be thinking right, because that's how it is. Maybe folks are just lazy. Maybe that's the problem. I don't know. But then there's this thump. One of those bad thumps that you already know what you're going to see before you get out of the car. I get out anyway, though, and there it is. A dead cat. Yellow tabby. Maybe it was a nice looking animal.

Over on the porch is a family—a grandpa, a dad, mom, some kids. The kids kick the dirt and stare at me. I guess they're waiting for me to get back in my car and keep driving. I don't. I've seen enough dead critters—that used to be me burying horses before Clint was old enough. I bend down—remember, I have to lean down because of my leg that won't let me forget—and pick up that cat. I mean pull out that cat and then pick it up. It's caught sort of between my tire and the road. In my hands, I hold it like you would a pie or a gift. Its tail and head flop off the sides of my hands and it smells to heaven. I guess I have forgot how bad dead critters smell, even if they haven't had the chance to rot yet.

There's a minute when I get to their yard where that family is staring at me and I am staring at the cat—I guess I'd call it a yard except there's no grass in it. No matter. There's no grass in mine, neither.

“I am so sorry,” I say. Then like bam, suddenly I am crying. Bawling. Can’t remember the last time I cried but here it is. Me crying, just over a dead cat.

“These things happen,” is what the grandpa says. He starts to stand up, but the dad puts out his arm and gets up instead. That mom has all the kids collected around her legs.

“I didn’t see it at all,” I say. “This is terrible.”

And I guess those kids are afraid of me because I’m crying so I try to stop. I suck up air and snuff my nose and try to stop.

“It’s alright,” the dad says. “It’s not your fault.”

“I just feel so sorry,” I say. And there’s the cat, in front of me still. Like an offering.

“Let me take it,” the dad says. “Hold on.”

He goes in the house and comes back with a towel. Then he takes the cat from me. Maybe that’s the cat’s brains that are sticky and white on my arms. I guess this makes me a cat-killer and I never wanted to be one of those.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “Is there something I can do to make it up to you?”

I mean make it up to the kids. They shuffle their feet and cling on to their mom’s legs.

“Not unless you want to come out and catch mice,” the grandpa says. The dad looks at him and chuckles.

“You a good mouser?” the dad asks me. His smile is just like half a marshmallow in his face. It looks so nice I smile, too. What with that cat’s blood on my arms and all.

“Fair enough,” I say. “Fair enough.”

Jessup

It seems as though I am absolutely surrounded by disappointment, but I am a man of good convictions, and I will therefore endure as I have always done—this is how it’s going to be, a reenactment with no draft records to prove it, but still. I guess I’ll grab my bootstraps and pull on.

The morning of the reenactment, I wake up when it's dark enough that I have to keep my eyes wide open if I want to see, but light enough that Sable's creased face looks like she is on the silver screen instead of on her white pillowcase—her skin is just like silver polish in this light. It's easily 4:30. Outside, the horse Trinnie borrowed for us for the reenactment is blowing through its nose into the grass. I reckon because the grass is wet, it's getting caught up in his nostrils, but something about that blowing makes me think of Vance. It makes me wonder whether or not he will be down for the big day, because he hasn't said yet and it would be just like him to send money and then not show up. Sometimes my head does make odd connections in the morning hours, I tell you.

Sable wakes up as I'm pulling on the wool grey pants she has stitched together for me.

"Where are you going this early?" she says.

"To feed the horse. To check the grounds. To make sure the reenactors didn't wreck the place last night," I say to her. Sable's face is turning from silverscreen to grey like a moth. Color seems to run out of everything just before the sun breaks. She closes her eyes again and I go out.

In the yard, gee, I feel authentic. I feel like this is real. Like I am 1865. I walk between the tents pitched out in the far pasture, listening to the men rumbling and snoring in their sleep. I am General Lee at this moment: the horse pulling at wet grass and blowing, men making asleep-man noises in their tents, robins humming in the tree branches, and in the background Turkeyfoot whispering along the sandy creek bed. As far away from the ocean as I am, I have that feeling like my head is in a conch shell. And boy, listen to the waves.

As I walk through those tents, I also begin to remember why I took an interest in this Civil War junk in the first place. I feel downright romantic, like doing something nice for Sable or telling Joy how much she's actually helped get the reenactment off the ground—maybe even telling her to go back to school and finish up. I feel like smiling or hugging a small child or clapping one of my brothers, maybe even Vance, right on the back and saying how glad I am to have them around. I am beginning to believe in Turkeyfoot and in the reenactment and maybe Joy is right about all of this being somehow in my blood, and for a minute, these tent rows could be just the same as my very veins—like I am walking

through my own body. There is the rough wool of the pants and with each step a clinking of the buttons on my grey jacket and I can blow out my breath and watch what comes from inside me become a part of what is outside. And here I am, thinking isn't it nice to know where you came from when there are so many people in this country that don't know and don't care about their family history? Gee, and I haven't thought of it before, but there are even people out there, the other folks, as Yossar calls them, that likely do care about where they came from but they wouldn't never know because that has been stolen from them, too. And well, isn't that sad, too, and it hasn't occurred to me before. It just hasn't. What I should've done was let Joy have her way and hired a bunch of those other folks on the other side of town to play the freed slaves that followed Sherman's army around. That would've just fixed me right.

Then, in one of these tents, someone rolls over in their nylon sleeping bag—I can hear the hissing of nylon and the squunching noise of the sleeping pad—and I am right back to present-day, 4:45 AM. And you know, the first thing I think is wellup, if those other folks' relatives would've just run faster, they would've never wound up in this country in the first place—so it's really their ancestors faults that they don't know where they came from, not my fault or my neighbor's fault or anybody else who maybe came from Europe's fault, either. Wouldn't you know it. Then the man, still in his tent, gives out an exaggerated yawn, a yawn like you don't just make when you're tired but more like when you're bored and you want everybody to know it. I hear him shake the nylon sleeping bag of the guy next to him, and I hear that guy yawn, too. I stand in the walkway of the tent city and listen to them talk:

“Today is the day, my friend,” one of them says. He has a voice like a bullfrog that has a minnow stuck in its throat. I place a bet with myself that he's overweight—like we had to buy extra yards of wool so's to make his outfit for today.

“I'll be glad to get this one over,” the other says. “Do the thing, get paid, get beer, then back home. Never thought I'd hear myself say that.” His voice is a weasel's—it makes me want to see his sneaky face so I can watch him better, you know, and keep an eye on our valuables.

“You're telling me, man. This one isn't like the others we've done,” says the Bullfrog. “To not have a clear story of how the battle went? Stinks, to me. And it smells like money.”

Of course, they don't know I'm standing a few paces from their tent flap.

"I know, right? It's barely a 'battle'. I think the guy is up to something," the Weasel says. "I mean, I watch a lot of the History Channel, right? I've never heard of the Battle of Turkeyfoot."

"I'm as much a buff on these battles as anybody, too. I'm telling you, it stinks of money."

"I hear you, man. This guy out here is either delusional or brilliant," the Weasel says.

"What about the family?"

"I don't know," the Weasel says. "I don't think they have any idea what this guy's up to. Have you seen how excited his daughter is?"

The Bullfrog laughs and it sounds like he's knocking that minnow in his throat up and down.

"Yeah, but she's just excited to get Tim in that cabin every morning."

"Just wait until we get paid at the end of the day. It'll be enough for us to get drunk tonight, at least. Tim says do it, so we just take his money and keep our mouths shut, right?"

And just like that, none of it is romantic or authentic anymore. I push my hands into the jacket pockets and hold out the front so the buttons won't rattle and start walking again—quietly, mind you, so those two in the tent don't know I was out here listening.

Later on in the morning, I find Tim over by the horse. He has her tied up to the corral post and I stand and examine him as he curries her coat in little circles, her hair a darker chestnut underneath the copper shine of her topcoat. She lifts her head as he curries her belly, her upper lip twitching and her long whiskers dripping dew on Tim's shoulder.

"I reckon you know how to please a woman," I say to him.

"Excuse me?" he asks. Like he doesn't know what I'm referencing.

"I reckon she's enjoying that," I say.

"Oh," he says. He sounds like a man who has tripped and is trying not to fall over. "Oh. Most horses do like their bellies scratched. Makes them a little like dogs, doesn't it?"

“I never had a dog,” I say. “Two women in the house was enough trouble for me. What do I need to put a leash on three troublemakers when I already got two hands full?”

Tim sets down the curry comb and picks up a soft brush. He doesn't want to look at me, thinking probably that this silence is awkward for me, too—but I love it. If he would turn around, I would smile right at him. He runs the brush down her neck and withers, laying the hair out flat. Through the pines on the creek, the sun comes down and the horse glints like hammered metal. She has her ears up and her head high, her eyes looking out over the creek. She shakes in a soft nicker.

“Now you got her all worked up,” I say. “How do you plan on cooling her off? A night on the town? Dinner down at Cowgrove? They can be hard to handle when you work ‘em up like that.”

He stops brushing the horse and turns to face out over the creek bed.

“Looks like someone is coming in through the back pasture,” he says.

I look out, too, and sure enough, my nephew and his girlfriend are tromping through the tall grass beyond the creek.

“Why in hell didn't they drive?” I say.

Tim turns back to the mare and picks up one of her front feet, running the hoof pick away from himself along the lines of her frog. The horse rumbles out another nicker.

“She must like them,” Tim says. “Talking to them that way.”

“Yes, I reckon you can read sweet talk,” I say. Ooo, but don't I want him to turn around and see me smiling.

“Can you hand me that saddle pad?” Tim asks.

I hand him the pad. The thing is stiff with dried horse sweat and the short chestnut hairs caught in the pad rub off onto my jacket.

“I hope you're getting your men warmed up, too,” I say, brushing the hair off my sleeves with my palms.

“They should be,” he says. Then: “Is Joy up yet?”

“You'd be the first to know,” I say. “Wouldn't you?”

I suspected it, and should've seen this coming. Clint gets preoccupied with that girlfriend of his and lets his cousin get swept off her feet by a mole-headed Revolutionary War buff. I don't have time to keep wraps on her. I'm the one that has to spend all of my free time thinking flexibly about how to get this cash cow to market. And let him have Joy, but first he's got to get me a new tour guide. Maybe even a better one that won't argue the story. Not that I don't love Joy. That's not it at all. She just doesn't pay attention. She's hard to train. She's got too many ideas of her own. Sometimes, I just want to set her down and clap my hand over her mouth, just to get her to stop it with those ideas. Like to make me sick—all this that's not what Sherman did or that's not how Sherman would dress and so on.

"I haven't," he starts. "I haven't seen her."

"Then maybe go find her. I'll watch the horse," I say. We stand eyeballing each other for a minute until Tim looks at the ground and scurries off to look for Joy—just like a coward. To be a fly on that wall, when he finds her—all that oh no what are we going to do now that your daddy knows!

Clint and that girl came across the creek and walk up to the corral just right after Tim takes off through the trees.

"You got something funny, Uncle Jessup?" Clint asks me. "Tell us the joke, too."

"It's gone," I say. "It's running through the backyard up to the house." Still makes me laugh, just thinking about Tim and his voice quaking and Joy with her eyes wide. Oh no, who has seen us go into the cabin!

"Hey there, pretty girl," that girl of Clint's says to the horse. The mare puts her wet whiskers into the girl's open palm and takes a carrot out.

"You keep carrots on you at all times, girl?" I ask her.

"Trinnie," Clint says. "That's her name, remember?"

Of course I do. That Trinnie girl rubs the horse's brow while she munches the carrot. The horse is looking at her like she is God or something. The horse nickers again. Every time she does that, her sides quiver. Clint goes over to the horse, too, but when he gets about three feet away, that thing starts pawing and twisting her neck. Trinnie grabs at her halter while the thing's feet snatch up and down until

Clint backs up. I stand back watching him scoot away from the horse like a little girl, all the while me leaning on the corral fence.

“What’d you do to that horse, Clint?” I ask.

“Horses don’t like him,” Trinnie calls over to me. “They get weird around him. Maybe they’re afraid because they’ve seen him bury their friends.”

“Don’t you kill that horse,” I say to Clint. “I’ve got it on loan. I’m not looking to buy dog food at 89 cents a pound.”

That girl Trinnie gives me a look like she’s throwing a knife. The horse prances her saddle pad off and Trinnie bends over to put it on her back again. Clint comes over to me and leans on the fence, too.

“I don’t get it,” he says. “Trinnie says I must be anxious for them to all act that way. I don’t feel anxious.”

“It’s a good thing that you’re not Sherman, then,” I say. “We’d never get you on that horse. Tell your girlfriend to put the rest of the tack on. Tim’s off looking for Joy.”

“Alright,” Clint says. He calls over to her to and she gives me a group of looks that all have sharp edges. The last one is the eyeroll, like she thinks all of a sudden she might be better than me.

“Take a word from me,” I say to Clint. “You got to get those women in control early on. Otherwise, they’ll run you clean over.”

“She’s doing what I asked, isn’t she?” Clint says.

“But what about your cousin? The one you’re supposed to look out for? You better tell me you didn’t know about Tim.”

“Not my business,” he says.

“Where’s your dad, anyhow?” I ask him. “He decide he didn’t want a piece of the cut after all? The ghost in his house keep him up all night? Silliest man I have ever met.”

Clint has a tight look on his face, but he doesn’t say anything, so I keep on.

“Wellup, I hope you have a plan to replace Joy when she runs off with Tim. I hope you thought about all that time you were spending with Trinnie when you were supposed to be with family. Didn’t I teach you anything? Wasn’t I a good uncle to you when your father was out digging in the dirt all day long? Family is everything, Clint. Family sticks together. I’m disappointed your dad never did teach you that. Get the horse ready and get dressed. I’m done here.”

I turn and start walking off because I still have to see if Jemson has come in yet. Just before I’m too far away to hear anything Clint and Trinnie might be saying about me, I hear Clint’s voice going up and down like every other word has an exclamation point on it: “This is not! family. This! is not! what I want! for us!” I can’t help myself: when I get over to where the reenactments soldiers are in various stages of pulling up their pants or buttoning their undershirts, I look back over my shoulder to see Trinnie ripping through the back pasture. Clint stands with the saddle hooked on his arm looking after her and the horse is tossing her head and pawing the grass over to mud trying to get away from him. And you know, I just smile.

So here we are, just a few short hours from making history. All around me, men pulling up wool pants or straightening hat brims or loading smoke bullets or whatever it is they used in their guns. And just like that, the feeling is back. I make my back like a slab of wood and stroll through the soldiers with my fingers looped into my jacket pockets, calling out at random things like, “Button that top button” or “Look smart, Soldier!” I don’t know any of their names, but you know, I’ll bet you General Lee didn’t, either. Because what matters is winning, not making friends.

Just before I get to the house, I stroll under a stand of maple trees with robins sitting in them. The robins make sweet soft chirps to each other, like they are singing in a choir. I stop and watch them, their little red bellies almost orange against the red leaves on the maples. With each chirp, they cock their heads at each other, as if to ask, “Are you as happy as I am? I am happy!” Then the next one answers in the same way, his little head tilted, too. I shift my weight onto one of my feet so I can watch them from below, and the next thing I know, they aren’t singing to each other anymore and they are looking down at me and they’re cackling, like crows, their voices coming down like little red bellied flying birds of rage. I

have never heard anything like it before, but I guess they must have babies up there or some such thing, so I go on to the house anyway and try to forget about it.

Sable

Jessup says I have to be Mom Cora for the sake of business. This is not what I want, but Jessup says we have to keep Brigget happy or she will complain to Vance or just simply leave, and then we will have no one to sell T-shirts in the gift shop. I told him that I could sell T-shirts in the gift shop, but he said that I am sullen. He believes that I have a bad attitude about this reenactment. Perhaps I do. I wish to tell him that this is because this reenactment holds my only child to this land. I wished for a life where she had chances to prosper and to grow. I cannot tell him these things. He believes they are bonding, he and my Joy. I watch them with my lips tight. It is almost as though his words are a thin, invisible cord tied to her wrists. He leads her around the backyard by this cord. Explain this to the crowd, go here, feel this, repeat after me. What have I married? In these moments, perhaps Vance is right. Perhaps I have gotten myself into a situation that is more unpleasant than I could have ever imagined.

My mother said to sign a document is to make it a pledge. To make a pledge is to seal your life away to something bigger than yourself. Honor what you sign, she said. If that is your husband, then you make the best of it.

When I made Jessup's general's outfit, fashioned just exactly after the outfit that General Robert E. Lee wore, I had to also make myself an outfit that might suit Mom Cora—here is another woman, I believe, who simply had to make the best of it. I bought yards and yards of grey wool at the fabric store, and tucked into a separate bag, I bought five yards of brown calico from the sale rack. I suppose it was on sale because calico is so dated and perhaps reminds one of homesteads on the prairie or little farms tucked into the folds of the landscape.

Jessup asked that his uniform be spotless and brand-new. Clint and I's outfits required careful staining. I sewed them together from patterns Joy ordered online, and spent hours before my sewing machine set up in the living room, listening to Brigget complain about the quality of cotton in the T-

shirts, the ability of my sewing machine to properly serge, and the general dislike she held for Jessup. I left some of the hems of my dress unfinished and tattered, for the sake of authenticity, and when Brigget saw this, she exclaimed that I could not sew properly. When I had finished my dress and Clint's outfit, I took them both into the yard and rubbed rocks down the fronts of them until snags and small threadbare areas appeared. I waited for rain and rubbed both outfits into the mud where our grass was cleared from the front yard to make room for a dirt parking area. When Clint would come in from clearing the kudzu in the creek bed, I would have him pull his palms down the sleeves and legs of each outfit until the dark mud stains were tinted with blood and the red clay of the creek.

In the shaded light of the dining room, I unfold the calico dress and hold it before my body. My mother-in-law asked for a full-length mirror before her death, and it still leans against the wall opposite the window. Facing this mirror, I unzip my jeans, stepping out one foot after the other. I pull my white Turkeyfoot polo over my head and let it crumple on top of my jeans. With my toes, I slip off my socks from the back of my ankles. I unsnap my bra, slide off my panties—before me in the mirror, my body is contoured, my torso like rolling hills. I am lumpy, old, soft in so many places. I hold a scar where they took Joy from my belly, like a ceremonial tribal marking crawling down my stomach. I have moles, freckles, small constellations of brown skin flecking my chest and arms. This is me—this is Sable. This body. Yet even this changes, has changed. Subtle tugs of gravity pull my skin, my flesh. I am sinking.

“Sable?” Brigget calls through the door. “Joy is asking about you. She says they're about ready to get started. What are you wasting time doing?”

“A minute,” I say.

One leg through the unzipped dress, the next leg. The cotton, worn soft from rubbing and washing. The hem like little hairs against my ankles. I zip the dress with my arms twisted backward and leave the room barefoot.

Joy

Joy,” I hear him say, his voice a little baby bird. “Please.”

I have just finished addressing the crowd, telling them a story that is not my Turkeyfoot, not the Turkeyfoot that I thought Vance told me many months ago nor is it the Turkeyfoot I've been telling to guests. The Turkeyfoot this crowd now knows is my father's Turkeyfoot with a made-up militia and a pack of dogs for Union soldiers. The crowd has maybe a hundred people in it, all of them sitting on metal bleachers my dad hand assembled for the occasion: middle school kids dressed in matching tie-dyed T-shirts with the school's name on it, arm chair historians with clipboards and thin-rimmed glasses and button-down shirts, families with kids that I could only assume must be Vance's recruits, and several people dotted here and there with flip flops and sun visors stopping in on their way to the beach. Beside the bleachers stands a woman in a skirt suit talking into a microphone, a camera. The man holding the camera has a thick black beard. He has holes in his T-shirt so large that I can see them from here. They are the news crew from our local station. On the top seat of the bleachers, another man holds a much smaller camera—he has been hired with Vance's money to record the reenactment. My dad hopes that this video will garner some interest in our battle. When he tells me this, he whispers, as if the History Channel might hear him, thus jinxing the entire project.

The school kids text and talk to each other in shrill voices and the historians hunch over their clipboards, their hands looping across notebook pages as they take down the details of the previously unheard of Battle of Turkeyfoot. It's Thursday, lunch time. I wonder, when they get home, will they find anything in their Civil War books? On the internet? If they call up to Chapel Hill, will there be any record of us there?

Tim taps me on the shoulder again and says my name.

"I don't think you have any right to ask me anything," I say to him. The crowd shifts and squeaks on the bleachers as they wait for the reenactment to begin. I have given them fifteen minutes—enough time for Clint to still show up and for Jemson to get his pants on after rolling in late from the airport.

"You misunderstand me," Tim says.

"What's to misunderstand? Don't you want to ruin us? Don't you want to embarrass us in front of this crowd?"

“Not you,” he says. “I don’t want to ruin you. I don’t want to ruin anybody. The truth is important to me.”

“Because I am supposed to blindly believe you when you say that you and Cowgrove don’t really want to run us out of business. There’s just not a big enough market, you all think, for a Civil War Battle Site and a Revolutionary War Battle Site.”

“I don’t know where you get this,” Tim says. “You seem to think I favor one war over the other. To me, they are the same—the same principles. I just needed to know how to act. I needed you to tell me what to do, how to lead.”

“Ladies and Gentleman,” I stay, calling to the crowd. “I would like to introduce General William Tecumseh Sherman. General Sherman, would you like to say a word or two?”

“So you don’t want to ruin me. Just my family. Just my wellbeing, right?” I whisper, leaning toward his shoulder. “Do you think I can believe that, after you threatened to stop the reenactment because of some historical confusion?”

“Joy—“ he starts. But he can’t finish. He doesn’t have a defense for that. I guess he’s as weak as my dad says he is. “Howdy,” he calls out to the crowd. “Pleasure to meet your acquaintances.”

“You have a story now. It’s not the story, but you have a story,” I say, still talking to his shoulder. “Go on and ruin us with it. Go on and tell these children a lie and then next year, they can go to Cowgrove on their field trips.”

For effect, I do a half-turn and sweep my arm out across the middle school children in the bleachers. Tim shakes his head and I watch as the mole trembles in opposition to his movement. I feel my finger tick, pulling itself up to apologize to that mole, but that time is gone. That is no more. Tim puts his general’s hat back on his head and walks out toward the pasture to get on the horse and start the battle.

“Enjoy the show, folks,” he calls out to the crowd, casting his voice over his shoulder.

Facing the crowd, I hold my hands on my hips to absorb the questions I feel coming. One of the historians raises his hand and begins asking a question before I can call on him. The newswoman steps out from the front of the camera and the cameraman aims the black box at me.

“I was here with my family last month on the way to the beach, and you didn’t say anything about a militia then,” he yells, having to push his question over the middle school kids and their shrieking.

“Has there been new evidence or?”

“Yes,” I lie. Just like my dad told me to. “New developments. Recently discovered artifacts.”

“Do we get to see the artifacts after the reenactment?” another arm-chair historian asks.

“No,” I say. “They’re being processed in Charlotte. They’re really recent discoveries.”

“What were the artifacts? How did you come to the conclusion that the militia was involved in this skirmish?” a middle school teacher asks, leaning over on his bowling ball belly. The question feels designed to give something for the students to write down on their Our Visit To A Reenactment handout that I prepared and sent ahead to the three teachers who booked this visit. I even know the specific question: How do historians locate and process important artifacts? What can historical records tell us about history? I want to kick myself for writing that question.

“It’s all a part of the new developments,” I say. From behind the bleachers, I see Jemson cutting across the field behind a stand of maples toward the cabin. So that accounts for him, but I still haven’t seen Clint since he followed after Trinnie several hours ago.

“When does it start?” a student asks. Her friends laugh until the teacher points at them.

“Would you say the actions of the two men were suggestive of the ideals of defending the house? Would you consider the death of these men as representative of the deaths of the Southern Ideals?” This is a man in a dress shirt and loafers with two small boys and a wife next to him—I can almost smell the cologne from where I am twenty feet away and know immediately by the style of his trousers that this man is a Vance Invite.

“They died for Southern Ideals,” I start, my words coming one at a time instead of at a steady rhythm. Because where is Clint? How am I to lead a reenactment without someone playing Willy? “In

defense of a household where they had hidden their mother and sister. But it was the chicken—rebellious against oppression.”

“The chicken was rebellious against oppression?” another man asks. He might be another historian.

“No—the boys, I mean men. They were the underdogs, right? And the overwhelming force that was Sherman...”

I feel another tap on my shoulder and pause mid-sentence to see my dad standing behind me.

“Where’s Clint?” I whisper. “I’m losing them.”

“Go on without him. You’re doing fine—tell them it’s about to start,” he says. His general’s buttons glint sunlight into my eyes and I have to squint to look up into his face. It’s funny: not seeing him in overalls.

“What about these questions? I haven’t answered them all yet.” I can hear men coughing behind me and cannot tell whether they are genuinely congested or suggesting that I have ignored them, my guests.

“Tell them you’ll answer the questions after,” he says. His voice has a current I have never felt before—swift and carrying me downstream with it.

“I still can’t, not even then,” I say. “I don’t know the answers to all of the questions.”

“They don’t remember.”

“What do I say if they do ask again?”

“They never remember,” he says. Then he lays the flat of his palm on my shoulder for a moment, his grey eyes coming right into mine before he goes off toward the house.

Clint

I catch her finally when she stops running and sits on the steps of this abandoned house. The yard of the house has a bunch of old couches and chairs turned all which ways and there’s a table half buried in a clot of kudzu. A fallen tree has gone right through the roof so that there’s a hole with sloped sides

where the shingles don't make straight lines but bend instead. Like a funnel. If I have to judge how long it's been since someone lived here, I'd use the furniture to say about 1960. Maybe even longer off than that. At some point, some of this house must've got fire. The windows are smudged along the edges pure black and the inside's just about hollowed out. Instead of a floor, you could walk right on the ground itself.

"Damn it, Trinnie," I say. I am hot and sweating and this close to the swamp, I feel like I have to separate the air before I can move forward through it. But here's Trinnie, sitting in the shade like there's a nice breeze and all she needs is a glass of lemonade.

"Don't talk to me like that," she says. Her voice is just about as cold as I imagine that glass of lemonade she'd like to have might be.

"Well why in the hell did you run off?"

"You don't get it," she says. And then there she goes, starting up with the water works. I look away, at the blackened windows, the pistachio colored couches tossed about, that little sparrow bird up in the trees. Not at her. That's where I don't look.

"You just don't get it," she says again. I heard her the first time.

"Alright," I say. I'll take the bait. "What is it I don't get?"

"You have a family that cares," she says. "And you don't even want to support them. You think it's easy to walk away from your family? Do you know where my grandparents came from? Pittsburgh. That's as far back as I can trace my heritage."

"That's not such a bad thing, Trinnie," I say. "There's lots of folks that don't know where their relatives came from. What does it matter if you do?"

"When I was in sixth grade, we had to do a project where we figured out what all of our ancestry was and then do a poster board showing the countries where we came from," she says. "I asked my mother and she didn't know. My grandparents both had dementia. My dad said get off his case about it, his parents were from New York. Do you know what I had to put on my poster board, Clint? Do you want to know?"

No, I think. No I don't. But she'll tell me anyway.

"I had a picture of the the Statue of Liberty, for New York, and I picture of a steel mill, for Pittsburgh. I got an F. I remember that. My teacher said I didn't try hard enough."

"Alright," I say. "So why did you run off back there?"

"I'm sorry, Clint, I'm sorry. I shouldn't run off like that. That wasn't right. Can you forgive me?"

"Okay," I say. "But why?"

"I didn't do that right," she says. She shakes her head and puts her palms out to catch her face.

"I was frustrated. That's no excuse. You don't run out on fights."

"It's okay," I say. And it is. Truly.

"My dad?" she says. "You want to know what he did? He doesn't talk to his parents because he got in a fight about whether or not a dent was in his dad's car or not when he borrowed it once. They don't talk because of a dent in a car. Isn't that stupid?"

"Yes." The little sparrow bird chirps, so I guess he thinks so, too.

"I don't like it when you criticize your family," she says. It's nearly a whisper. "Joy tries hard. Even your Uncle Jessup—he's not so bad. I just don't like it when he jokes about the horses."

"Jessup's a liar, Trinnie. Joy lets herself get controlled by him. You know she's supposed to go back to school, don't you? You know she's dropping out indefinitely because her daddy wants her to run the tours and any future reenactments for him, not because he loves her—that's not what I think. Just because he doesn't want to have to hire a real tour guide. Is that love, Trinnie? Is that what you were wanting from your family?"

"Nobody is perfect," Trinnie says. "Joy says she'll go back next semester. She just wants to help him with the first reenactment."

"You do a lot of talking to Joy, Trinnie?" I ask her. "You and Joy getting real close?"

"Joy says she'd love it if we'd stay here. She says we could live in a house next to her and Tim—wouldn't that be nice?"

“No,” I say. “No. We want out, remember? We want to go somewhere.”

Coming through the trees, I hear metal clacking. I hear the horse calling out. Deep men voices are just muffled by the pine trees. So I guess they’re getting ready to start the reenactment.

“Trinnie,” I say. “We want to go somewhere. Let’s go now.”

“I don’t want to go,” she says. And she can’t even look at me when she says it. She just looks right at the ground, right at that clay beneath her feet. All that kudzu around the house, growing anyway at over a foot a day.

“That was the plan,” I say. The house sits in a clearing, but the trees seem to come in closer. Their branches seem to knit together around me. “We have a plan.”

“Stay with me,” she says. “What’s so bad about having a home?”

Except what if you don’t want it. What if you want to taste somebody else’s air. What if you want to know what it’s like to wake up to mountains or the ocean or honking car horns.

“We could still travel,” she says. She stands up and walks stiff-legged over to me, like she’s nervous I might spook and run off. “We could make a life here and travel to all those places you want to see.”

“Okay,” I say. “I really do want to be with you.”

“I know,” she says. “I know you do. I do, too. We can make this work.”

But I’ve been changing. The soil of Turkeyfoot washes out of my blood with each new shower. I scrub my face at night with a wash cloth and dishsoap—for the oil. I watch my reflection in the mirror as the skin around my eyes seems to pull their oval shape in new directions, up, square, corners. Even my nose pushes out from the nostrils less. I am no longer changing. I am changed.

Trinnie reaches her hands up and puts them flat on the fronts of my shoulders. Behind her, through the trees and beyond the house, the sun shoots east and shines a beacon across the western edge of the clearing. Although there are pine trees on three sides of this clearing, nothing gets in the way of the light as it stretches out into a tobacco field just outside of the trees. Just like that, the horizon opens itself up to me. The earth, the shackles of soil, fall away.

“I should get back to the reenactment,” I say. “They’ll be wondering where I am.”

“Can I meet you back at the house later? I can’t go back looking like this,” she says. Her eyes are thick and red, her nose swollen, even.

“Why don’t you go get sandwiches or something for the girls to eat?” I say. “You know they’d appreciate it. It’ll do you good to go be with people. You’ll feel better.”

“That’s a good idea,” she says. “That will give me some time to look better, won’t it?”

“You’re a pretty girl anyway,” I say. I kiss her on the top of her head. That’s my goodbye, though she doesn’t know it.

“Okay,” she says. “I’m going to get sandwiches. I’m excited, Clint. Aren’t you?”

“Of course,” I say.

She smiles, all teeth, then turns and goes through the first row of pine trees headed back to Turkeyfoot.

“Are you coming?” she asks, looking at me over her shoulder.

“Just a minute,” I say. “Go on ahead. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll count on it,” I say.

I wait until I can’t see her back twisting through the trees, until I can’t hear her shoes crunch on the pine needles, then I go the other way, through the tobacco field and to my dad’s house, where my car is parked. When I get to where I can’t see the abandoned house anymore, I don’t hear the metal bayonets clanking. I don’t hear the hired soldiers yelling at each other. I strip off the shirt—tunic, Joy would say—and hang it on a low pine branch. That’s when I know I’m free.

Sable

I stand on the porch of the cabin in my calico dress with calculated stains so that I look as though I have had my knees in soil for most of the day. I have been asked to kill a chicken. I have never done this before, although I am aware that Mom Cora must have killed many chickens during her life. This

was custom. Jessup wants me to kill a live chicken for the sake of business, for the sake of entertainment, but I cannot do that. I could never do that. My mother's mother killed her own chickens. She said they run in circles with no head for many minutes. I could not stomach such a horror. Instead, I have a live chicken in the side yard which I will catch, bring into the cabin, lock in a back room, and replace with a defrosted Tyson's frozen chicken breast packet. These chicken breasts will be hidden in a pocket I have lined with plastic wrap and sewn into the side of my dress. Jessup says from the distance of the bleachers, the crowd will not know the difference between a live chicken and a plucked chicken breast. Jessup has also enlisted a small girl who is, I imagine, about six years old. When I ask her where she came from, she points to the side of the cabin where the "militia" is waiting. I can only assume that she is the daughter of one of the reenactors. I have asked her name and received only a shy smile as a response.

The little girl is supposed to be playing the part of Bean. In order to do this, she follows me on the porch as I sweep the straw broom from one side of the porch to the other. This is a boring activity for a six year old child, and I suspect that she has also been told, perhaps ordered, to play this role. Beyond, we can see the crowd as colors and moving figures, but we cannot see their faces. This little nameless girl might be afraid if she could see individual faces, but instead, she smiles at me and twists her tarnished blond hair in her little dirty finger. She has smudges of dirt on her face and the mother in me wants to rub them off, but I am not sure if they are there to make her more authentic as a little 1860s girl or if they are simply oversights in her real-life parenting. I do not want to be here, and I suspect she feels the same way.

We sweep from the side of the porch facing the crowd to the side facing the creek, and when we walk by the window, sunlight flashes off the brass buckles of the "militia" leaning on the far side of the cabin wall.

"Sable," I hear from the far side of the cabin, from the side of the cabin where the "militia" is hiding. I am not surprised to see Vance huddled on the outside of the porch.

"Jessup did not think you would come," I say to him. Next to him stands my nephew, Jemson. He is dressed in a tunic I sewed together so that he can play the part of Cole. "Where is Clint?" I ask him.

“That’s what we’re waiting for,” Jemson says. “He hasn’t shown yet.”

“Sable,” Vance says. “I have to show you something.”

I see my daughter and my husband before the crowd, and when they move off, the little girl and I begin to hear the far off rhythmic thumping of the Union reenactors coming in.

“There is no time now,” I say. “It is starting.”

“Later,” Vance says. “I must talk with you later. Jemson, a moment?”

Jemson goes back to the other “militia” men on the side of the cabin.

“They are starting without Clint,” I say.

“I wanted to tell you that you look beautiful,” Vance says. “You look like the picture of 1860s defiance. I’m sorry. I had to tell you.”

“You will be caught in the middle of the battle, Vance. Go.”

“I’m coming back after,” he says. “I’ll be watching.”

I lean the broom on the cabin wall and look down at the little girl as Vance runs toward the creek in my peripheral. It is time for us to go into the side yard to catch the chicken. The little girl stops twisting her hair and grabs the hem of my dress much in the way my little Joy used to do.

“Come, little girl,” I say. I hold my hand to her and she takes it. Her fingers are cold, slick. A child’s fingers seem eternally sticky.

“Are you afraid?” I ask her. She nods first and then she shakes her head.

It is for the sake of business, little girl, I wish to say to her. This is not real. I tell her this. Do not be afraid.

Vance

The creek bed is couched in tall longleaf pines and feathered by yellow pines. Most people cannot tell where one type of tree begins and the other ends. Beyond the creek and slightly over toward the swamp is a pecan tree with low branches. I knew this tree as a child, pulling myself into those low branches so that I could see the panoramic Piedmont plain. In the nook of the thickest branch, I mapped

the basin of the PeeDee on the palm of my hand—the river tracing my long life line, the swamp pooled at the base of my middle finger, Turkeyfoot itself cornered into the bend of my heart line and life line. North was my thumb. West was my wrist. I could always find south by simply spreading my fingers.

Although I am now decades from that child-me, I once again loop my arms around the lowest branch and pull my body into the tree. I have pine sap on my fingers from pushing through the creek bed and the bark of the pecan tree pulls away as I lift my hands to reach the next lowest branch. The branches give with my weight, slightly, so I climb close to the trunk where the wood is strongest until I reach a middle branch—from that nook, I can see over the sunken tops of the pines in the creek bed and into the back pasture where the reenactment soldiers straighten their collars and load smoke-ammunition into their antique guns.

A man on a chestnut horse circles the group of soldiers, the blue of their wool uniforms clashing against the dull green of the fall grass. The horse flips its head, the bit winking silver in the mid-morning light. The man is dressed as Sherman, I can see that from my tree branch—his hat cocked sideways and his chin a rough shadow underneath. I cannot see clearly from this distance, but I search for wrinkles in his uniform, for authentic mud clots on his boots. He addresses the soldiers in blue with his arms, gesturing in circles and pointing to the direction of the swamp—the base of my middle finger. The men stand not as soldiers, their bodies seemingly disjointed and stiff from unaccustomed ground-sleeping. While many of the soldiers in the latter years of the Civil War had been older men, many of them were just boys, too. Barely old enough to leave home, let alone fight. Many of these men, however, are far older than even the oldest true Civil War soldiers might have been. Hair the same cotton-grey as mine slides out from underneath their infantry hats, and they hunch along the tree line—following Sherman on the horse—and back into the farthest reaches of the pasture opposite of where I am crouching in the pecan tree. They cannot see me for the distance and the silver sided leaves.

I watch over the creek bed as Sable, dressed in a faded print of calico with her hair twirled into a bun, pulls the small child toward the side yard where a chicken awaits. I remember, briefly, a conversation with Brigget several weeks ago, Brigget's harsh whisper through the phone telling me again

that she won't play Mom Cora. She won't wear the dress or sweep a porch and her hands will absolutely not touch a chicken, not even a deboned, dethawed, package of chicken meat—*make Sable do it*, she said. *Sable doesn't care what she looks like anyway*. What would Brigget look like down there, scratching the hard ends of straw across the wood while the small girl skips circles around her? Would the soft, fall wind pull on the loose wisps of Brigget's hair like it does Sable's? Would her bare toes spread long and elegant, like fingers, from beneath her calico dress?

Beyond the cabin on the back porch of the house, a collection of war buffs, students, history teachers, beach traffickers, newsrecorders, and neighbors shifts and chatters on metal bleachers as my niece holds her arms before her, pushing their noise down into the soil so that the reenactment can begin. On the far edge of the bleachers, I can just see Gerald and his family, his two boys just as interested in Civil War history as he is. They have notepads on their laps, miniature versions of the clipboard Gerald holds to his brow to block the sun. The crowd cannot see the militia soldiers leaning against the cabin on my side of the scene. These men smoke filtered cigarettes and drink from plastic water bottles looped onto the belt hooks of their wool, home-sewn uniforms.

Then the blue men in the back pasture are together, popping out of the grass like lions. The Sherman on the horse slides a saber out of his belt loop—I cannot tell from here if it is real yet it flashes, monstrous, in his gloved hand. He yells, "NOW!" and I can hear the men reverberate his voice in their own roar. They come out of the pasture fast—to the creek bed with frightful speed, their backs straight and their bodies suddenly young and ready leaned into the attack. The horse comes to a small clearing on the banks of the Turkeyfoot and lifts her knees to jump the water and she is across. The Sherman does not pull her back to check the men's progress as now he and I hear the sloshing stomps of boots in the shallow water, rocks rolling under moving feet. Then some of the men are across, too, and I cannot, for a moment, see but the tops of their blue hats as they melt into first the longleafs and then the yellow pines on the outer edge of the creek bed. They mass and collide beneath me, pushing and grabbing at branches and arms and their hideous bayonets whisper sunlight into my eyes. The Sherman jerks hard on the horse's mouth and she spins, her head up and against the bit, to face the men coming through the pines. I

can see white overtake the dark pools of the horse's eyes and she lifts one front foot and then the other as the men push past her, their antique guns heavy in their pumping hands. But some of the men do not push past—the older men have stopped by the Sherman and his horse. They lean their guns against the fronts of their thighs and heave in the damp air. Beyond on the cabin porch, the young girl hides her face in Sable's skirt. Sable holds the broom across her body, as if to block the attack. Half of the men are nearly to her—these are the younger ones, the ones floating fluidly over the soil. A few feet from me, some of the older men are sitting, cross-legged before the dancing forelegs of the horse.

“CHARGE!” the Sherman yells. He points his saber first to the older men on the ground, then in the direction of the cabin. Some of the men do not even look up at him. The ones that do heave and the brims of their hats are soaked midnight blue from the run across uneven pasture land. They beg him in their upraised eyebrows, please they say please. One of them has a blood pressure meter that he has taken out of his home-sewn pocket—“I'm sorry,” he says to the Sherman. “I'm so sorry.” Below me, more men coming pushing past—I had not realized before there were so many. They flood over the creek bed and continue past the old men and the Sherman on the horse. The Sherman yells, “CHARGE” again and the movement of his troops is not changed, not united.

And for this charge, I am like a bird in the trees, one hundred and fifty years ago. I imagine this as all battle—pulsate, raid, pour over the enemy. I am unable to look away from the blue wool and hard boots on pine straw and the shaking of my heart as the steady marched run jolts my pulse erratic until I hear laughter. Suddenly civilized laughter. At first, I do not know what it means.

Laughter quivers through the crowd beyond, now a full being folding and gaping and pointing its finger in the direction of the cabin. In the side yard, they are watching Sable, dressed as Mom Cora, chasing a chicken. She has her hands on level with her knees and she and the small girl shuffle in concentric circles around the squawking bird. The small girl does not realize that her flapping skirts are frightening the animal, and when her little hands clutch for its feathers, it flies a few yards and falls into a wing-spread run. Sable sees that the girl is running the chicken into the side of the cabin and moves to pin the bird against the wall but she catches her foot in the authentically long and loose hems of the dress

and then she is down, her face pushed in the soft garden dirt of the side yard. The crowd rolls with laughter and the sound rumbles over the pasture and falls upon the Sherman's ears. He looks at the men on the ground below the horse and shakes his head—his saber now twinkles as he slides it back into his belt loop but he cannot stop the men already in motion toward the cabin. They are too near and some have already stopped at the porch to watch the woman and child falling over themselves to catch the chicken. These men mill around like cattle, kicking their boots at dirt clods and catching their breath with their hands on their hips or on top of their heads. Sable stands up up and rejoins the girl in her chase, but noticing the Union soldiers in the front yard of the cabin, she slaps her hands against the dress to loosen the garden dirt.

“Look, Bean,” she calls out, her voice theatrical and stiff against the now soft laughter of the crowd. “It appears we have visitors.”

The girl does not hear her or does not listen. She still cannot catch the chicken.

“We’re here to collect,” one of the younger men says, in keeping with a script most of these men seem to have forgotten. The man next to him opens a granola bar and chews, nodding. I wonder if the crowd can even hear him. “In the name of General Sherman.”

“Come on, Bean,” she calls to the girl. “We’ve got to make a run for it!”

She escapes to the side door of the cabin and pauses in the door frame. Bean is supposed to follow her, I suppose, and when she doesn’t, Sable disappears inside anyway.

“Sic her, boys!” the Sherman calls after the men. His voice hangs over the stationary heads of the older men at his feet. His words choke through rehearsals and stage voices, but they are projected onto indifferent ears. None of the soldiers move.

Suddenly, Sable throws open the door to the cabin and steps onto the porch, her right hand holding high a defrosted boneless chicken breast. Her left hand holds a knife that does not glint in the sunlight. The Union soldiers surrounding the porch are beginning to twist their gazes between Sable on the porch and the Sherman on his horse by the pine stand. The Sherman leans to one of the older men, the

one with the blood pressure monitor, and sends him over to the group by the cabin—they have forgotten their lines.

“Come and get it!” Sable, in character still, yells. She is shaking life into the chicken breast, as though it were still twitching fresh from the kill. Sable glances toward the crowd, not at the soldiers. Parts of the crowd are shifting, facing one another to find the right reaction—is this comedy? Is this truth? They move their weight to the opposite sides of their bodies. Some of them cough or check their watches.

“Here, Boys,” Sable yells again. “Eat it if you’re hungry!”

She tosses the chicken breast into the crowd of Union soldiers and it glances off the hat of the soldier eating the granola bar. He is stunned, holding the breast in his palms before him.

“It’s diseased!” Sable cries out. She has another chicken breast in her hand, one that must have come from a pocket in the dress. She chucks the second breast into the collective of Union soldiers. This one lands on the polished boot of a man checking his cell phone. Then a noise starts from the back of the cabin—something like wild dogs or the rumble of a waterfall. From my angle in the tree, I see Jessup shooing the militia behind the cabin into motion. The Union soldiers, some of them still lounging against the banister of the porch while others keep a careful eye on the trajectory of the third chicken breast that has appeared in Sable’s hand, are immediately surrounded by the militia soldiers, their antique guns pulled as they circle the collection of blue uniforms. The crowd on the bleachers gasps. The third chicken breast comes down suddenly on the neck of my son, Jemson, dressed as Cole Jalin, and he is knocked to his knees. I wait to feel something move inside me, but he stands and holds the chicken breast in front of him, just as the Union soldier has. I have forgotten that he was playing Cole. He is not dressed in a Confederate uniform like the others. I imagine him as a member of the crowd, come out for a special demonstration.

None of the men dressed in blue or grey are paying any attention to Sable on the porch now, holding yet a fourth chicken breast in her hand. They are focused on the Sherman coming over at a trot, his body bouncing against the rough rhythm of the horse’s stride.

“No, no, no,” he is saying.

“We’ve got you surrounded,” one of the militia says to the Union soldiers. “You won’t get us a second time.”

“FIGHT,” the Sherman commands. His men move closer to one another in the circle. Their eyes do not leave the bright sharpness of the bayonets that surround them.

“I said FIGHT,” the Sherman commands again. The horse trots around the circle of militia and Union soldiers. Her bit foams and she twists her head against the pressure of the metal on her mouth.

“Might as well surrender, General,” one of the militia yells—he is faceless, perhaps drunk from the contents of his plastic bottle.

From the porch, Sable’s lips move, her voice directed to Jemson dressed as Cole. I cannot hear her but see him nod and lower his bayonet. The man next to him, however, turns and pokes him in the ribs—“hold strong,” I think his lips are saying.

“Yeah,” he says, “No way you’re getting out this time.”

“You think you can change history?” the Sherman begins—this is improvised, off the cuff, but he is interrupted, suddenly, by the fourth chicken breast as it pelts the horse directly in the hind quarters. She becomes electric, dynamite, fantastically unglued. Her body twists and pitches, squealing as she lightens her hind end and unseats the Sherman. He lands on his stomach, his hat somehow caught on her saddlehorn, and watches as she gallops across the pasture with her tail flipped out behind her. She stops below me and quietly pulls at the grass.

The crowd stands simultaneously, many of them with their hands over their hearts. Women are open mouthed and clutch at the shoulders of their children. Men, some with clipboards still in hand, run across the open field to where the Sherman is still flat on his stomach, Sable kneeling at his side. The middle school children turn to one another, texting and chattering as they mill about before the bleachers.

But I watch the soldiers. The militia men stick the fronts of their bayonets into the soil and stand detached from this man on the ground. One of the Union soldiers is good friends with a militiaman. They stand close to one another, talking excitedly with their hands. Jessup is amongst them now, his arm

on my son Jemson's shoulder. They point at the man on the ground, and then Jessup walks over to catch the horse, which is still grazing directly below me.

At first I think, maybe he won't see me if I stay still and do not make a sound. He grabs the horse's broken reins, and without looking up, he says, "Did you think maybe I didn't know you were up there?"

"I had hoped as much," I say. I have nothing left but honesty. Not strength or goodwill or even reliability. Just honesty.

"Why don't you come down?"

"I'm not sure I should," I say. Because if Brigget sees me. If Jessup knew what I have in my pocket to show Sable.

"It was a splendid disaster, wasn't it?"

I expect defeat, sorrow, disappointment—as I pull myself down, limb by limb, Jessup is smiling. He strokes the horse's neck.

"I couldn't of hired somebody better than you," he says to her. "That was a real crowd pleaser."

I see through the trees that the crowd has gathered around the Sherman, who is now standing with his hands over his stomach. The men with clipboards frantically write his words across their notebook pages, nodding, smiling, their eyebrows peaked in curiosity.

"Is he okay?" I ask.

"You're the doctor, aren't you? The respectable doctor in a tree?"

Jessup laughs under his breath and looks at me with a smile that doesn't match the glint in his eyes.

"I've doubled, maybe tripled, your investment money," he says. "They loved it. They're calling their friends. This was a hit."

"This wasn't history. You could never replicate it," I say. "You don't have the draft records to back up the militia."

He is suddenly like watching a car coming up too fast in your rearview mirror, knowing you can't stop it from smashing into you.

"They want the drama and you can't give that to them again," I say.

"And that's okay, too," he says. He lifts the broken reins and starts to lead the horse back in the direction of the crowd. "I won't need to give it to them again. I'll find another way."

Joy

I made him promise, and yet, it seemed to make no difference. He is gone. I know this the moment the militia leads the charge without him. The women take the hands of their children and wait in vans for their husbands to come back with notepads and exclamations about how hard that fellow hit the dirt. The middle school children stream off the bleachers and circle Tim with hesitant footsteps. And I—I pull my body through the clumps of reenactment soldiers in white undershirts and tank tops. They lean into their nylon backpacks, rolling their wool uniforms and black boots and thick leather belts together, pulling against the stretched seams of the zippers and reopening to shove the lump down farther. A couple of militia soldiers hold the edges of a canvas tent and fold it together, like a flag. Their faces are all too narrow, too cleanshaven, their hair too long or too brown or blonde or pushed to the wrong sides of their foreheads. Some are tall enough to be him but too thick in the middle. I think once that I see him, that soft tilt of his head just left of center, but the man has on blue pants instead of grey ones. He turns and, too, his nose spreads too widely across his face.

And pushing myself through the crowds of blue and grey wool and cotton sweaters and cheap middle school perfume and pale arms that live in offices and hair washed and fragrant, through all of this and the shrill voices of young girls experiencing (maybe for the first time) a man shamed and the heavy voices of the soldiers lifting and pushing and tugging and the children asking over and over mommy mommy mommy—there is Tim. Apologetic, maybe sincere. I can just see him through the various legs that surround him. His face smeared with one long drag of clay. The elbow of his general's jacket is ripped open. I can hear him: *I'm fine, really, there's no need to call anybody just give me a minute to*

catch my breath. He nods to the onlookers and holds his stomach with one hand while the other hand shakes shoulders or waives off concerns. The crowd closes around him and roars delighted when he claps my cousin, Jemson, on the back and smiles. Perhaps they see this as reconciliation—healing, a handshake between the dirty Southern boy and Sherman himself.

I count all of their faces, twice, even the ones with blue pants. I had made Clint promise, but it made no difference.

I leave the crowd, the pasture, my father pulling tack off of the horse. Inside the house, I dial a number I know well on the telephone. I expect her to answer, even, and she does.

“Okay,” I start. “So this was exactly what you wanted.”

“Joy?” Trinnie’s voice has a thickness to it—not anger, just a hollow thickness.

“You wanted him to yourself, which okay, I understand, because I’ve felt that way, too. I know that selfishness. But you didn’t have to take him now when I needed him.”

“I don’t,” she says. “That’s not it.”

“He wasn’t here. He didn’t come and he had promised to me that he would,” I say, feeling the words rolling up from my throat. “It fell apart without someone to play Willy.”

“I don’t know Joy, I don’t.”

“Okay, so you’re the hero, Tim’s the hero, but where does that leave the rest of us?”

“I left him there,” she says. “I didn’t take him. I went for sandwiches—”

“So, what, then? You planted the seeds? You watered them and told them about places he could be and so now you’ll just get married and move to the suburbs?”

“He’s there with you,” she says. “He has to be. Doesn’t he? I wanted to bring sandwiches.”

“Sure, and you’ll just be at home packing boxes.”

“I’m in my car, Joy,” she says. “I have the sandwiches.”

Outside the kitchen window, the crowd detaches in clumps and scatters to mini vans, buses, small sedans. My dad has taken the horse away. Tim stands in the crowd as it spirals out from him, one hand on his hip while the other shades his eyes.

“I convinced him to stay,” Trinnie says. “He wanted to leave, but I convinced him to stay with us. He’s been having these dreams, Joy. I think they’re signs, omens, you know? In the dreams, he can’t climb out. Then it rains and the sides of the graves get so wet that the clay covers his fingers and his feet can’t get hold. The sides cave in over him and he wakes—I feel him—sucking in air. He stops breathing, Joy. I told him those dreams mean he wants to stay.”

Tim is at the center of a galaxy. People spinning out from his arms—can I see his mole from the window? I remember a morning, in the cabin, his heartbeat coming through to my lips pushed around the contours of that purple mole—

“Do you think he left? Do you think he would go without me?” Trinnie’s voice splits on ‘go’. “I told him I love Turkeyfoot as much as he does. I said what we talked about, how we could stay and live next to each other and you and Tim could have babies that would play with our babies. I told him how many babies we could have and Sunday dinners with your mom and his dad could make that coconut cake. Right, Joy?”

—and he whispering against my throat please please please because he wanted something for me except I couldn’t find it, what he wanted. I couldn’t find where that was.

“Clint loves family,” Trinnie says. “We’re family. He’s not going to disappear.”

History doesn’t have opinions coming next against my throat, Tim’s breath heating the memory of veins in my neck. Is that Trinnie and Clint, too, in the mornings, blankets roped over and around legs and robins in trees and—no, they don’t have the creek like we do. That is ours.

“Joy?” Trinnie calls into the phone as if it is a dark room. “Joy?” she says again.

“He never showed,” I say. Outside, Tim shuffles out of the crowd. *Parallax*, he said, that night on the picnic bench at Cowgrove—*the stars are in a different order if you could move elsewhere to see it*. He navigates a batch of men—used to be soldiers—with backpacks and nylon tentsleeves, his hand flat over his eyes. Among these men, still in his ripped blue pants, he seems to look out over a battlefield, like he is trying to figure the best way to move them across a valley or a clearing.

“He was there this morning, with the horse,” she says. Her voice feels like slow river water in my hands. “What do you mean he never showed. He said he was going back to Turkeyfoot after I talked to him in the woods.”

Tim separates the leftovers of the middle school children waiting for their bus to arrive. He is, for a moment, the history teacher in period dress, the moving mechanics of the past, the teacher with a first name who gives everybody a good grade as long as they pay attention in class.

“Joy?” Trinnie says again. “Where could Clint have gone?”

There is a man with one of the clipboards in Tim’s way. The man wants to shake his hand and takes it from Tim before he can offer it. They lean into each other and Tim listens, nodding, while the man seems to tell a funny story that make the edges of his mouth want to laugh before he can get through it. When he hits the punch line, his laugh starts before Tim’s. The man has a business card to give him. Tim takes the card and nods as if they are brokering a transaction. It doesn’t hurt the image any that Tim is wearing a Civil War General’s jacket with buttons hanging like little brass eyes from the lapels.

“I don’t know,” I say. When I try to imagine the places Clint could be, I can only picture Tim behind a lawnmower, cleaning a pool, kids—our kids, maybe—playing soccer with Popsicle stains on their tongues.

“I don’t know either, Joy.” She is brinking on desperation and I feel like I should say something but I don’t know what it would look like and I can’t find it. “You would be the first, you know. He would tell you he was leaving before anybody else. He respects you, Joy.”

But who else would he tell? I try to think of the faces of my family members—June and Jemson with puffed cheeks and freshwater eyes, Vance with whole canyons running down the sides of his face, my dad and my mother, together so long they seem to share the same dipped nose. I try to think of my cousins on my mother’s side, how they live collected in a single town hours away down thin, two-laned highways. Their faces bounce and shift and blend until I can’t tell Aunt Sandra from Yossar.

“Joy. Joy,” Trinnie says. That need in her voice falls heavy in my ears. “I can’t just sit and wait and not know because I think I do know. I think I do know where he went. Can you help me find him? Joy,” she says again. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“He’s left you, too,” I say. Because we are realizing at the same time. We should have seen this coming. “He didn’t want you either.”

I push the off button and stare at the phone. Tim moves on from the man with the clipboard and now climbs the steps of the back porch. He leans on the rail with one hand and holds his back with the other, moving both feet onto each step before climbing the next. From this closer angle, the hair on his arms twists through the holes in his elbows. I can hear the buttons clatter against one another like he is climbing through an old Western. I try to read his face but it is darkened by his General’s hat.

The phone starts to ring again. I open the knife drawer and close the phone up in it. Maybe there are two kinds of family: one that has the same blood and genes and one that has something more like I don’t know what. Clint has always known that what without having to *try*, but I’m tired of trying, too. I have spent so much time *trying*, forcing family to apply to everybody, like it is a life sentence, something you can only escape in death or by digging out of it and running through a tunnel carved out with plastic spoons in the night. I have this image of Clint in stripes, or tearing through a swamp as a deserter of battle and I want to forgive him. Through the drawer, the phone rings in dull chirps. I hold my hand as if to hold the drawer shut, as if the phone might jump out. Outside, Tim’s boots scuff over the wood on the porch. I cannot see him for the angle out the window, but I hear the clods of dried mud popping off and rattling between the slats of wood. The rumbles of car engines and gravel roll into the room as he opens the sliding door. The light comes in behind him and he takes off his hat, holding it before him as an apologetic gentleman, an oil baron, another century. When he lifts his chin, his eyes, black tar, pull me to him.

So I thought it would do some good, the telling. But I guess that Tim couldn't do much. I can't blame him. It should be me that did more. I could do more. I guess it has to happen sometime. The past catches you, it most certainly does. But then, I've never seen a man so capable of spinning a situation other than my brother Jessup. I used to tell Clint, I always did, don't you ever trust your uncle Jessup. I used to tell that to Vance, too, but he didn't want none of it. Because Jessup, he's liable to slip through your fingers. He's that fish that flops out of your net and slides back to the water. Just when you think you've got him, then he isn't there no more.

No, but I'm not surprised. I used to make up reasons and excuses for him, too. Maybe Jessup's more like that wounded dog you find. A stray dog with a bunch of cuts on it that you bring in and try to save. At first, it seems like that dog couldn't be any more than the best friend you've ever had in the world. Then one night, you wake up and it's growling at you and then you see the foam. Sure, that dog can't help itself. Never asked for rabies. It just got it. It can't even stop itself from hating you. The dog don't even recognize you anymore, so you can't take it personal. But still. You had gone and thought you'd made a friend.

I remember another time with a brother—this time with Jessup. I don't recall where Vance was. This was way back. We were kids playing in the swamp, doing just what our mother told us not to do. There is a ridge in the swamp, I guess you could call it an island. On the hottest days, Jessup and me would swim over with a couple of Cokes to that island. I remember swimming with that Coke bottle, using it like an underwater paddle. The swamp isn't deep, but you sure didn't want to touch the bottom. If you've ever had your bare feet in swamp mud, you can remember how that slime don't seem to ever come off. Maybe it wasn't the island we used to sit on. Maybe it was one of them trees and we would sit on the roots that came up from the water and thread our toes through the green skin of the swamp. We had this game where we would count the snakes that went by. Maybe we should've worried about gators, but we didn't. On my best day, I had three water moccasins, two black snakes, and a python. Jessup said there weren't any pythons in that swamp. He said it was just a big stick, but he let it count anyway. That was the only time I beat him. I guess he just had better eyes than me, because he could see the black

snakes in the trees, too, and count them once they fell in the swamp. I never heard them splash, neither, but I believed him.

The day I won the water was real still. Like we've never seen it be so still. Most times there's this current and the skin of green leaves and scum and whatever else goes sliding to the ocean, taking sticks and snakes and fish, I guess, along with it. But that day, wasn't nothing going to the ocean, and when me and Jessup pulled our legs out of the water, they were near covered in leeches. If I didn't have a fit. I was too scared to jump in the water and swim over so I could get to the house, and I was too scared to keep those things on my legs. I would've never done it otherwise, but it was too much. I sat down and let my brother see me cry, just waiting for him to lay in to me about being soft. Except, Jessup sat down, too. He put his hand on my shoulder and said hush now brother. You just sit still. He pulled off the fattest one first. Its long sucker came out and I could see my blood trickle down to the water, but I didn't make a sound. It hurt like hell, but there wasn't no pain that could've made me say something. There were more around my ankles. Just little ones. He got those off next. He had just as many on his legs as I had on mine, but you know, he pulled off every one of them leeches on me before he pulled them off hisself.

So the past gets you. You like to think of how people were instead of how they are now. Like maybe that dog won't have rabies in the morning if you can keep it from biting you tonight. It goes back to how many chances you're willing to give a man and what those chances will amount to. For example, if Willy and Cole would've given Sherman a chance to march on through, where would I be today? Would I still be here, too? And what if Joy would've said no and gone back to school like my brother Vance told her? Would those folks that came to the reenactment still have their money in their pockets? Then there's that girl. If Jessup wouldn't of run off into the woods, maybe the three of us could've pulled her out of the fire. I guess we all like to look back and think that the past can help us figure out the future. But you know, maybe we don't need to figure out the future because it's set on figuring itself out. But still. To think a man could make a profit out of ruin. Sometimes I don't know if I'm meant to be impressed or afraid.

Clint

I don't even make it to the end of the dirt road where the highway connects when I see this black dog trotting through the ditch ahead of me. I stop the truck and get out—the dog comes to me right away, his tail moving in a circle and his fat tongue pushed out the side of his mouth. I check him for a collar—nothing. And I think, well if this isn't the nicest dog I've ever met. The dog turns so I can scratch the base of his tail and that's when I feel my fingers run over thick scabs and holes that push nearly into the dog's muscle. I stop my forefinger over the deepest hole and push into the sticky flesh and heat of the dog's haunches. He immediately begins whining, like he is saying, "Ouch ouch ouch," so I pull my fingers out of his black hair and they are slickened in brownish dog blood. I hadn't noticed, but he has dried clots of the blood caught across his undercoat on his back. The dog twists around and begins to lick his blood off of my fingers like it's his fault and his eyes look like how I feel and I figure, it would at least be nice to have company, because it can only get worse from here. And I can no more leave the dog on the side of the road than I can leave anybody else especially with him being hurt and besides, I do worry a little about coyotes and what they might do to a dog, even a big one like him, if he is already cut up a bit.

I get a towel out of a box in the trunk of my car and lay it out across the passenger seat, like he is a kid I'm bringing home from the swimming pool or something. When I turn around, the dog starts barking at me: "Let me be your dog! Let me be your dog!" He hops right in and so I know that he'd had somebody at some time that was an owner and I get to feeling sympathetic for the dog. Maybe he got lost trying to find a duck or dumped because he couldn't help himself from chewing up the couch cushions or I guess a family could've just left him behind when they moved to a new state. He doesn't seem like the type to run away. I guess he could've just felt like things hadn't turned out the way he had planned after all and on top of that, people in his life weren't being so great to each other, either. So we have that in common.

"Hey there, Bill," I say. The name just comes out, so I stick with it. It seems like a good name for starting over. "We're going to get you fixed up," I say to the dog. He thumps his tail on the passenger

seat and pushes his folded ears toward me. I close the door and get in to start the car. Bill's paw comes up on my arm as I shift the gears, and his pads are cracked and dry from walking through the rough grasses. I turn the car around on the narrow road—the nose of the thing goes down in the ditch and then comes back up headed toward my uncle Jessup's house. It's a risk to go back there, but I don't think Trinnie has tracked me down yet and everybody else is likely dealing with the fallout from the reenactment. At the least, they might still be taking things down out back, and if they are, I could make a bet that Sable will be back in the gift shop or getting away from the rest of them for a few minutes on the porch. Maybe then none of the rest of them will see me at all and then I'll only have to say a goodbye to Sable. That won't be so bad. Beside me, Bill runs his tongue over the dashboard of my car, leaving long streaks in the layer of dust. The towel behind him is spotted rust red with blood.

I pull into the driveway at Turkeyfoot and am surprised to find it empty except for Vance's car. I guess I thought people would stay after the reenactment and mill around. My aunt Sable is on the front porch, one hand on her hip and the other on her forehead, like she has been waiting for me to show up for hours. Her body bulges out like apple shapes stuffed under her dress and dried mud runs up the fabric to her thighs. She comes down the steps to my car, tripping over her torn hems. Bill and I meet her at the foot of the stairs.

"What is this?" she asks. Bill pushes his nose against her knees. Up close, I can see the dress has some sort of pattern on it—little bundles of dark brown wheat on a tan background.

"A dog I found," I answer. "On the side of the road."

"Whose is it?"

"No collar," I say. "I guess a stray or a toss-out. I've been calling him Bill."

Aunt Sable reaches her hand down and smooths her palm down Bill's back. His tail goes around in circles.

"He is bleeding," she says, pulling her hand off of his back. "What happened?"

"I found him like that. I was afraid to leave him out there—coyotes."

“He is too big for them,” she says. Bill stands nearly to my knees at his shoulder. “He needs some betadine on those bite marks.”

“I can’t take him to the vet,” I say. I don’t want to tell her yet that I just want to get on the road.

“I have got some in the house,” she says. “Why not leave him out here and come in. They are about through putting things away.”

“I don’t think I should,” I say.

“Because of the reenactment. I know. Come anyway. No one is going to say anything.”

“I don’t think so,” I say.

She looks at me for a long moment with the corners of her eyes wrinkled together and then she goes in the house. I sit down on the steps next to Bill and scratch my nails behind his ears. Across the street, starlings land on the telephone wire. They run yellow beaks into the feathers on their backs, the wire swinging under their feet. After a few minutes, Sable comes back out and sits next to us.

“You didn’t tell them, did you?” I ask her. I can imagine: Jessup coming down, his body swinging like a whip down the stairs. Or Vance, his voice low and punctual, asking so many questions. I can’t picture Joy. Maybe my imagination just doesn’t want to.

“I do not think it is any of their business,” she says. “I did not agree with it, either. I just could not escape the role as easy as you could. Here.”

She has a strip of fabric in her hand—it’s the torn off hem of her dress—and she ties it around Bill’s neck. Holding onto that collar, she takes a hand towel and rubs his back with betadine. The brown liquid mixes with Bill’s dried dog-blood and drips down, collecting in rust colored pools, on the porch step. Bill sucks in air and whines a little.

“You should worry about rabies, Clint,” she says. “These look like bite marks to me.”

“Do you think so?” I ask. “I thought maybe a barbwire fence? Or mange?”

“Mange would also be bad for you. Later, it would be bad for you and for Trinnie. You would need a shampoo.”

“Okay,” I say. “It’s probably not mange then. It’s probably bite marks. So what then?”

“I am just worried about you. The dog could have Tetanus, if he has been caught in a fence. If these are bite marks, you do know that rabies is 99.9% fatal? Yes?”

“But that’s not true for people, Aunt Sable.”

“Incorrect. If this dog has rabies and bites you, then you will have rabies. Then what if you bite Trinnie? She would also have rabies. I cannot fathom the horror of that.” Sable shakes her head, her eyes closed, as if she can’t see it—

“It won’t bother Trinnie any,” I say. As soon as it comes out, I wish that I hadn’t said it.

“Rabies would not bother her? Clint, honey, rabies bothers everybody. Rabies is a universal killer. I remember a dog from my childhood. He had been living in a woodpile by one of our sheds. My sisters and I brought him scraps from our breakfast every morning. He was a beautiful dog—his hair was so grey it shone blue and he had long, pointed ears that nearly touched when he listened into the woods. It was a terrible thing. My father never told us the dog had rabies. One morning, the dog had foam on his gums. He snapped at my sister, but he fell over before he could bite her. She ran back to our house with me behind her, calling her a coward for being afraid of our own dog. My father—he never said a single word. He had been watching. I can still hear the shot, the first one, because he missed. The dog screaming in the woods—then a second shot. That is when the dog stopped screaming.”

“That’s terrible,” I say. I have never heard a dog scream before, but the sound is in my ears anyway. “But dogs don’t really get rabies anymore.”

“You may believe what you will,” she says. “They most certainly do. I do not want to have to worry about you. You should take this dog to the veterinarian. He needs to have his shots.”

“Well, I’m in a bit of a hurry, Aunt Sable,” I say. I want to get a few hours out on the highway before it gets dark.

“Where are you going? I do not want to worry about you, going somewhere at night.”

“Aunt Sable,” I say. Bill stands and shakes off the betadine scrub. Brown spots fleck onto Sable’s dress. I want to tell her. I want to tell her but she tilts her head, smiling, and across the street, the

starlings begin to sing together, chirping and swinging and some of them flying in small circles. “How did the reenactment go?”

Sable wipes her hands on the towel and pulls her arms apart to show me her dress.

“All things did not go as planned,” she says.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “Because of me. It was my fault.” It isn’t a question. I do feel bad, looking at her dress again and then noticing how she also has chunks of dried mud in her hair. I’m not so sure I need to know what happened.

“I never said it went poorly. It simply did not go as planned. Jessup says we netted nearly \$3,000.” She pauses and pulls her fingers through Bill’s coat. “I used to wonder, why is it that we make plans and they fall apart? We build walls and they would crumble. I begged to the ceilings of the house at night, afraid to pray to God because he would not recognize me. How are we supposed to keep moving forward, I would ask to the rafters, when our feet are locked in mud?”

“You said it was a success,” I say.

“Yes, it was. For me and for Jessup,” she says. She leans the side of her hand against her forehead and I watch her back go up and back down again. Her hand lies flat and motionless on Bill’s back. His tail thumps against her legs. “I tried to protect you all,” she says. Her voice quivers and I imagine her words in waves, ridging and falling across the thick air. “I tried not to let you get stuck—you and Joy both. I had chances I should’ve taken. I picked the wrong one.”

“Joy can take care of herself,” I say.

“There are boxes in your car.”

“Yes.”

“Should I suspect that there is a suitcase in your trunk?”

“What did you just say about getting stuck, Aunt Sable?”

“I promise not to tell them,” she says. “You can go and I promise that I will not say a word to them where you are going if just tell me so that I know. Tell me. Tell your aunt—I have been more of a mother to you than anyone else in this world. Please.”

“Aunt Sable—“ I say. I can’t look at her so I look at the starlings on the telephone wire again. The wire is a swingset under their yellow feet.

“Tell me! I cannot stay awake in the nights, imagining your body crooked in a ditch or mutilated against a cracked windshield. Please. I promise. I will not tell Joy. Not even Joy.”

“North,” I lie. “To the Adirondacks.”

“The Adirondacks.” She doesn’t phrase this as a question, as though she knew all along that would be where I would go. “Mountains. I grew up in mountains. The air is different. It is easier to breathe. You will find that, too. You will feel how easy it is to breathe when you are in the mountains, above the rest of the ground and the rest of the people and their pesticides. When are you picking up Trinnie?”

“She doesn’t know,” I say.

“She wanted to leave, too. I remember her saying this at the reunion. How was it? She dreamed of travel?”

Trinnie—when we started, she wanted out, too. After this morning, after she claimed she wanted to stay with my family, which I know she meant with Joy, her voice began to feel like chains. I went home with the image of her back moving away from me in my mind. So much motion to it, like the starlings swinging. I was packing boxes without immediate awareness of what I was doing. Like the motion of her back—no. I had my own motion then. I had momentum. My hands lifted and tossed and curled boxes into my arms. I used the suitcase for clothes, the closet echoing the empty clanking of hangers with each shirt I tossed in. Then the boxes were in the car. In the living room, I left travel books, the globe, magazines, and a sweatshirt Joy had bought me from her university. I held a notebook page in my hand and stared at a pen on the coffee table, but I couldn’t put the right words together. I pushed aside the magazines and remote controls and left the blank page underneath the pen. I wonder, has she found that page yet? Does she understand why it’s blank?

“She doesn’t know,” I say. The blank page. There had been a travel magazine at the top of the stack—visit Vancouver, I think. I pushed that underneath and left a catalog of some kind on top. “She’s not coming.”

“I know you will never want to leave the mountains. Flatlanders, that is what we called them, say the mountains make them feel claustrophobic. That is not true. They are a cradle. You will only want to leave if she comes to you. She will want to bring you back down. You cannot let that girl bring you back. There is nothing here for you.”

“I’ll visit,” I say. “I’ll miss you. And Joy—and my dad. I don’t think I can stay away forever.”

“No. You do not think you can. Do it anyway.”

I try to find something else to say to her without breaking. Without saying this isn’t it this isn’t what I want to do but I am set in motion and if I stop now I might not ever start again and I’m afraid of stillness but I’m afraid of that motion, too—

“Send postcards,” she says. I don’t know what she is doing because I can’t look at her without feeling my insides crack apart but I can tell from the corner of my vision that she isn’t looking at me, either. “From the mountains up north. I have never seen them. I imagine them. I imagine they are white and young.”

“I love you, Aunt Sable,” I say. “Goodbye.”

I lay the palm of my hand flat on her shoulder and stand up. Bill follows me to get back in the car and we head back down the dirt road. His back rubs brown smears of betadine into the towel on my passenger seat. Overpasses connect blocks of dairy farms or pastures or stands of bare trees above us. Seven hours later, we are driving through Knoxville, the sun shooting orange into our eyes as we follow after the flattening horizon before us. We have indeed driven through the mountains, heading west not north, but neither Bill nor I found the air to be any different from the hot clouds of wind blowing up from the coast back home. Bill barks at passing cars. When I close my eyes against the sun, the black outlines twist across my eyelids in the shape of Turkeyfoot.

Vance

With my hands still sticking from the pine sap and that glint of Jessup's eyes still winking, like intermittent sun through a thick stand of trees, I pull it from my pocket. Just to see that I still have it, so I can know what nobody else knows and feel that not knowing, that doubt. It is the photocopy from yesterday, inauthentic and smeared from where my fingers had been nervous and wet pulling the printed paper from the machine too early so that I could fold and hide it, even from Gerald who moved with deliberate swishes of his white lab coat in my direction. And the folded paper lived in the narrow pocket of my trousers until this morning, then it, still folded, as if the folds could keep me from the truth of it, moved to my jeans pockets. I found my face in the mirror, in that darkness of pre-dawn in an empty house kept cold at nights because there wasn't anybody to warm but myself. I have always been a coward. I see that now.

I had not intended to bring the original copy, yet my hands reached for it on the dresser as I went out. I should have no more than a photocopy. The original I have stolen, two days ago, from the records library. I had the pulled book of Civil War enlistments, yellowed and brittle and smelling sweet of rot. I had been afraid to search this particular book before, except I worried that Jessup might send Joy to find it before the reenactment—for his proof that these boys were soldiers. For justification of a militia. In a far corner of the library, I hunched my body over the evidence and, coughing to disguise the echo of ripping paper, I tore the records from the book. I said, "Thank you" to the woman behind the counter. I told her I had left the book on the far table. I had a meeting at work—yes, the chemical company. Sorry, no time to reshelv the book for her. And I left—thinking, from generals and colonels to sons to ghosts was born the South of today: still haunted with war and poverty and clay but now ghosts are displaced, scattered—Southern in blood, in legacy, but cast and lost like dust across a fallow field, moths in the flame of intent. We are haunted: there is always a before.

Even now, even with the photocopy snapping off of my sticky fingers, I can feel that ease if the wind would take this folded paper and carry into the Turkeyfoot at my feet. Nothing is simple. The creek rustles the words of Sherman: *war is cruelty*. I had come with a plan attached in my mind to this

photocopy. I was to come, watch the reenactment, and then, alone on this far bank, I was to burn the folded paper. The evidence would disappear until my death, when, maybe, someone would find the original, the torn shard from the record books, shoved between the pages of a book on tobacco ailments or the effects of DDT on the human body.

Except it's not that easy. I find myself wanting to tell Sable—hoping this knowledge could be her impetus, could move her to me. I unfold the paper in my hands, as if time and friction in my pocket, the simple rubbing of paper against the fabric of my clothes—the very fabric a barrier between the contents of this photocopy and my skin—could erase the records, could deny my brother the truth. But I am the tree. I may bend and twist and fight in the wind, but I may not let myself be uprooted. If my father were to say something to me from beyond the grave, I believe he would tell me to let the truth go where it might. That concealing evidence does not change the simple facts of origin and inheritance. There are lines across this earth and over the oceans that trace us each of us back to Africa, to sand dunes and acacia trees and intermingled herds of bizarre animals cleaving hooves into savannah landscapes. How long can I lie to myself that we came from Turkeyfoot? Was not Turkeyfoot simply where we stopped moving?

I am a coward. I have felt this coastal wind, this harbinger of winter clouding on the horizon, for the entirety of my life and now I am afraid. Now, the paper unfolded but as yet ignored by my eyes, I focus on the small group—family, I think, that is who I belong to because I have no one else not even my wife because who is my wife but a woman who wants sunrooms and polish and marble when I want back what I lost, no, what I gave to my brother. Before I move to join my family across the pasture, I tuck the paper under my arm and bend to untie my shoes. I pull my feet from them and the soft bank, not quite mud but *enveloping*, creeps into the spaces between my toes. I move, with bare feet feeling not the cuts of mowed grass or shards of torn rock or snapped sticks, toward them, the unfolded paper held before me. The edges of the photocopy crack in the wind, which quickens as I emerge from the pines on the creek bed and into the open pasture. The voices come clearer with each step I take, then their faces sharpen. When I take the first bare step onto the wooden porch stairs, the dried wood planks bite at the

unaccustomed soles of my feet. Above me, Joy explains to a woman—Trinnie, as she comes into focus—that she doesn't have any more information. The Sherman extends across a wooden bench with a plastic bag of ice on his side that moves up and clacks as the cubes shift within. He breathes in a slow, asleep pose as my sister-in-law holds the bag so that it does not fall from his undulating side. When I reach the top step, Joy and Trinnie stop talking. Sable is the first to speak to me.

“Vance,” she says. My name comes over her bottom lip like lilac breathing out into summer air. Sunlight touches her in ways it never dreamed of finding Brigget. “And here we thought you did not have an opportunity to come.”

Because age finds ways of making us hate the decisions we have made. I am overwhelmed by what could have been.

“I have been here,” I say. I want my voice soft, too. I want her to reach her fingers into my words. “I have seen everything.”

“I'm not sure that's what I want to hear from a stranger,” the Sherman says. I had thought him to be asleep.

“All things did not go as planned,” Sable says.

“Where is Jessup?” I ask. The photocopy flitters at my side. I feel winter pulling it from my hands but I will not let go. This is not the sort of paper one would want a man like Jessup to find curled into the bushes in his side yard. This sheet of paper could become a weapon for Jessup—he could use this against us.

“He's taking the horse back,” Joy says. “Uncle Vance—do you know about Clint?”

“I have something I have to show you,” I say. “How long until Jessup comes back?”

“He has been gone perhaps thirty minutes,” Sable says. “Brigget is upstairs. She is running the sales figures for him along the way. What is it?”

“I'm sorry,” Trinnie says. “I don't want to be pushy. Does this have to do with Clint?”

This is bigger than Clint, I want to tell her. This is bigger than anyone in our family except Jessup, and that is why he can never see it, never know.

“Do you know what this is?” I ask them. I hold the photocopy before my face. The last weak flashes of sunlight illuminate the white paper. “I have found this. I have it—Sable, Joy. Do you know what I have found?”

“My God,” Joy says.

I have the draft records. Here, in my hands, is proof that Jessup was right. They were soldiers. They were honestly enlisted soldiers.

Jessup

Sometimes a man needs time alone to realize the accomplishments he’s made. I am surely a self-made man, the old-fashioned kind like from the Depression Era when men would just grab the straps of whatever boots they were wearing and they would pull up. That’s what they would do. Rise up and overcome. Yossar thought he had me ruined, but I could tell him that it takes more than that to skin a cat.

Walking back from delivering the horse to my neighbor down the road, I have to say I’m almost touched that it was such a success. I impress even myself sometimes. The sun is shining so that it’s nearly hot. If this road were dirt and not gravel, boy, I would just be right back in the 1860s or some such year, except I would be victorious, so I guess that’s one way I’m better than the folks I came from. You know, I still half-way expect a mule cart to roll on by me. I have to remind myself that I’m just feeling nostalgic. I guess that’s pretty typical for a guy getting ready to take off on a new path. But I’ve reached a new era—the dawning of a new Jessup. And this Jessup has money. I heard once about a millionaire that went bankrupt three times before he hit it big. I guess this new Jessup is on his way to the same fortune.

All along the road, I keep saying hello to the plants and critters—like they are brand new to this new Jessup. Hello, kudzu. Hello, robins. Hello, swamp and moccasins and I still bet there’s a gator or two in there. It’s funny how a stack of twenties in your pocket can change the smells and sights around you. Like you get that crisp sweet money smell in your nose and suddenly, even the swamp don’t smell quite so bad as it usually does.

But still. As I walk, I keep thinking about what my brothers would say if they were walking with me. Yossar, he would be pulling the I told you so's. He thinks he's stopped me by telling Tim we don't have the draft records—I don't know what he thinks he's stopped me from. It's a wonder he can see anything of the real world with his head always stuck below the lip of a grave hole. Vance? Wellup, he never had a good grasp on me in the first place. His head's so full of what he thinks he knows that there's no room for what he might actually know, if I could just get him to pay attention. The two of us aren't so different. That's where the friction comes from. There's just one thing that Vance won't let go of, and that's loyalty. He loves money as much as I do, that's something we all know, but he thinks he's got to suffer. He's got it in his head that a man, not just somebody who is a man, but a man—maybe gentleman is the word he might use—chooses sadness and suffer so that those around him can be something better than. Better than what, you want to know. I never got the answer to that, either. I guess better than Vance. If we were younger, I might shake him. I might shake him and get in his face and say, suffer is a choice, Brother. Try to do something for yourself once and awhile. Like how earlier, I caught him in that tree, darn near sobbing his eyes out because he missed Turkeyfoot so badly and the very smell of the creek made him homesick, I guess. And he says I just ruined the story for him because it wasn't authentic. I've never seen him shed a tear for missing his wife. Sometimes he just plain shocks me and says the name of his kids. But you bring up Turkeyfoot—he nearly goes to pieces asking how it's doing, if it needs anything, and so on. Like you might expect from a boy with a lost dog or some such thing.

So I've got my head on straight. I can look down this road and if I wanted to, I wouldn't even look at the kudzu and I might just stuff my ears so I can't hear the robins, either. Look down it, I say to myself. Because at the other end, once I get going with Sable, the other end is my first footstep to me pulling my boots out of this Turkeyfoot mud.

Vance wants to talk authentic. I guess he still believes those relatives—how far back were they, even—were soldiers. Then Yossar sticks his nose in and tells Tim it's no battle, as if I am supposed to be surprised by that news. Wellup, anybody knows as well as I do that it wasn't a battle. Hell, they weren't even soldiers. You know what I call that reenactment? Do you want to really know? I'll tell you the

word I learned for it: cash cow. Because I could give a lick for history and heritage and all of that mumbo jumbo. And alright, I do care about authenticity, but only so much as it brings in tourists and the media. That's all. I'm in it to profit, to rise above.

If you're raised up on the grown-over burned path Sherman took first south then back up north, you grow up with a story about vengeance. You grow up with that fire he lit in Atlanta still burning in your chest except now that fire's hate. I don't think Sherman lit that first Atlanta fire in hate. But a man reaches his peak and what does he do? I say, he's got to find a new peak to climb. Atlanta wasn't enough for Sherman. Atlanta was the beginning—the initial cut in the tree. Because once you get started on the damage, I reckon it's hard to stop. I don't blame him, no. Fire isn't easy to stop, not once you start looking at the flames. Well, and fire's loud. Maybe he never heard the screams inside of it, because I guess even that's a choice—whether or not you want to hear those screams or not. I imagine this flat land looked just like a fireworks show as he watched the grasses and tobacco and cotton burn away to nothing. I bet he thought he was setting us free from ourselves. No hands for the land to hold us with now.

So, I think to myself. I've got time. I can walk slow, and I do. I walk on the shoulder of the gravel road so that my feet make puffs of dirt with each footfall. Wellup, what did they do when the embers Sherman left behind quit glowing? I bet if I looked hard enough, there were other Jalins, ones that survived and did what you might as well do when your money's a burned clot of ashes and you've got nothing but the clothes left you were wearing while your house came down and maybe the skinniest ox or mule you ever had that Sherman's army didn't take because it might just die at any minute. You start thinking about this new word—it starts popping out from under your scorched tobacco leaves. You can hear the pines whisper it when the wind blows. Then it comes out of your own wife's mouth: Opportunity. And you remember the government's promise of land—that's one thing you can't live without, of course, but maybe you can learn to live on a different patch of it. Besides, you start to think, you've farmed all of the opportunity out of that patch of land you were already living on.

Because I'm thinking West. I've got a plan—and it's Manifest Destiny. A few more months farming this Turkeyfoot Battle Site, and then I'll give it over to Joy. I'm going to head out as far west as

Sable wants to and buy another parcel of land. Something inexpensive, overgrazed, barren—so long as it's cheap. Then, then I'm going to set up a homestead—a spot that says, this is where the Jalins fled from words like Oppression and Hunger and Revolution and Ruin. Oh, what a sad time for the Jalins, back in the late 1860s. All they wanted was to recover, maybe find a new way of life, and after so many of them had been killed in that bloodiest of bloody wars...And I'm thinking we could set up buffalo, maybe hire some people to play Indians, and we could hold regular reenactments of skirmishes between our Jalin settlers and the native folks that lived there—a whole string of reenactments stretched all across the country. And why not? Hasn't anybody I know thought of it yet. Because I've got another word sitting on my lips, and it's Franchise.

Sable

When Jessup enters through the front door, he has a stack of cash in his hands that is nearly two inches thick. I cannot see the numbers on the bills, but that is certainly the largest amount of cash I have ever seen in Jessup's hands. He flips through the bills with his left thumb and shakes his head, shaking off disbelief.

“We are rich, my dear,” he says. He is smiling. “Rich rich.”

I cannot take my eyes from those bills. He flips them and I am reminded of the flip motion books from my childhood: flip through to see a horse galloping, or to see a goose taking flight. Flip through the money, and I can see my husband, my daughter, and me climbing out of the cotton fields.

“Where's my brother?” he asks me. And then, knowing what I will ask next, he says, “Vance.”

“I'm here.” Vance answers my question in his voice. He is behind Jessup on the porch. Beside him is my sister-in-law, Brigget. Brigget has her bags, the handstitched ostrich and soft tapestries, pushing against one another on her shoulders. She winks at me and forces her fingers into Vance's closed hand.

“I told you, didn't I?” Jessup says. “What a return! Tell me, brother, what was your initial investment?”

“A thousand dollars. Plus the T-shirts,” Brigget says. “And I think we should charge some interest because of the college loan yet unpaid.”

“Joy is going back,” I say. I try to breathe fire through my eyes in her direction, but she is also looking at Jessup’s stack of money.

“My initial investment was a thousand,” Vance says. “But we’re fine. I think you two should keep it. Maybe you could take a vacation, Jessup.”

Jessup has his back to me. He is facing Vance and I want Vance to look over Jessup’s shoulder so that I can nod and thank him with my motions because Brigget will not let me thank him with real words. Except Vance will not look at me. Vance will not look at me because of that moment on the porch—Joy took the records and hid them in her pocket, then Vance took my elbow and we went down to cabin and he spread his arms and said, “You have the wrong brother.” To which I said nothing and instead counted the Canada geese as they went over us and I said, “Twenty-five.” And Vance said, “I brought you proof. I brought you salvation. You can leave him now—and we.” I did not let him complete that thought. Jessup is my husband.

Can you tell me—can you ever think of a person who has not kept secrets? Is it not human to push the limits of truth? Truth is a triangle, my mother use to say. Each point is a story, and in the middle, you find truth. Instead of saying these things to Vance, I went back into the house to wait for Jessup to return.

“Sable,” Jessup says to me. I have nearly forgotten everything except that Vance is aging. He is aging on my porch. Here, I see the decades like hired hounds on his arms. He is sinking into the floorboards of the porch.

“Sable,” Jessup says again. He flips the money in front of my face. The bills flutter before his teeth. “Pack your bags.”

See Sable, the flip motion version of Sable climb the stairs. Flip through the pages and watch Sable pack her clothes and her husband’s clothes into two suitcases. See Sable consider the bedspreads.

See Sable, flip through and watch her, thumbing through a photo album. The flip book ends with Sable on the windowsill, pressing her nose against the glass.

Jessup says ‘vacation’ like we will return. He has promised me we will leave when we have enough money. He has promised me that we will have a fresh start, perhaps somewhere with mountains. When we drove down from the mountains, just children dewy with unexpected and nervous love, we drove into a screen of smoke. I was moving from the mountains to be with Jessup, the image of my mother watching us leave over her crossed arms still caught in my mind as he sped down the mountain highways. I could feel the car shifting its weight to the outer wheels on the turns and closed my eyes for the excitement of my body rocking inside the car. The screen of smoke came suddenly, on the far bend of a stretch overlooking the Piedmont and the foothills. Jessup said, “Shit,” and threw his foot on the brake pedal. The smoke mixed with burning rubber and metal grating against itself. Along the shoulder, cars were parked and people, families, stretched their necks and tried to look over or through the heavy black smoke. Then we, driving at a short crawl with the fog lights on even though the sun was out and shining beyond the smoke, we could see. The front end of a car embedded in the grill of a semi truck. Glass. There was a shirt, a green flannel pattern on it, hanging by the collar on the open door of the little car. “We should stop,” Jessup said. So many others had already. They wandered in the highway. We drove the car through the mass. “No no no,” I said. The grill of the semi had been painted red. Perhaps it was not paint. I fell into Jessup’s lap and felt his hand wrap itself on my skull. Even now, I identify this moment as love. That was the spark when I had thought it was the peaches.

Before I go down the stairs with my bag, I find Joy in her bedroom, sitting on her bed with Tim.

“Where are you going?” she asks me.

“We are having a vacation,” I say. “Your father deserves a break.”

“Are you going to tell him?” she asks. I had not noticed upon entering the room, but the draft record lies crinkled between the two of them on the bed.

“Tell him what?” I say.

“The draft record?”

I do not answer her directly and instead, I smile at her with my eyes closed, as if I am enjoying something secret in my mouth. She looks at me in something like anger or shock. As if I have won a battle simply by engaging in it. As if I am simply a mercenary.

I walk over and give my jewelry box to Joy. Inside, it has my wedding band, a heart-shaped necklace, and an arrowhead from the back pasture. All of these are gifts from Jessup. They are symbols he has given to make our love verifiable. I suppose some love needs such symbols.

“What’s this?” she says.

“Please watch this for me while we are away,” I say. “You may find it suitable storage for the draft records.”

She holds the box in her palm and opens the lid slowly with her other hand, as if the world’s terrors might blind her should she open the box too quickly.

“Goodbye,” I say. “We shall return.”

“Your ring is in here, Mother,” she says. “You’ve left it.”

“Enjoy your break,” I say. “Much love.”

“Don’t tell him,” she says.

I am already on the stairs. Before me is the door, Jessup, the highways. My finger rubs against its neighbors with an unfamiliar bareness of skin on my ring finger that I cannot help from rubbing with my right hand. Jessup opens the car door for me and takes my suitcase and packs it next to his in the trunk. I do not know where we are going nor how long we will be gone, but I trust him to take us there.

Joy

I used to see us like a spider web with my father in the middle and my mother and me circling around him. Beyond my mother and me, Vance, Yossar, Clint. Then Brigget, Jemson and June, Trinnie. If I were to outline this, I guess it would look more like an atom than it would a spider web.

My mother and dad left yesterday afternoon with two suitcases and a stack of cash. I spent the night next to Tim in their bed—mine wasn’t big enough for the two of us—listening to him wheeze and

moan when he would roll onto the bruise rushing up his side. I wanted to take him to the hospital, but he said he was fine. Sometimes, he rattled the bed with the shaking of his lungs. In between those rattles, I tried to remember a time when I thought of him as just a pawn, just a means to the end—I tried to picture his head as a round ball, his body a tapered cone, moving in short bursts and capable of only narrowsighted assaults. I found my arms folding themselves around his head, pulling his restless face into my chest. When he shuttered, my whole body would hush and wait until I could hear his thick breathing again.

There was a time when I thought *force* could be that clear, sticky web pulling the family together.

Tim and I sit at the kitchen table for hours in the morning, staring at the back pasture like it might stir or shift. I stand every half hour or so and pour us each more coffee. Sometimes, Tim rolls his fingertips across the tabletop. Neither of us is bored. When the robins stop chirping morning and the sun crosses to the top of the house, I look at Tim and say, “Let’s burn it.”

“Don’t you think they’ll come back?” he asks me.

“I want to burn it,” I say.

“They’re artifacts, Joy,” he says. He is whispering, as if someone else might be listening. “It would be arson. Destruction of State property. This could be really bad.”

“I want to burn it,” I say again. “Will you help me?”

“Joy,” he says. He pulls his elbows onto the table and lets his face fall into his hands. “Joy,” he says again, as if the repetition of my name will call sense back into me. But this is the only way.

“Will you help me?” I ask him again.

“I worry about you, Joy,” he says. “I worry that you’re just upset—calm down, you know? I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret later.”

But there’s so much regret already. Regret is what I want to burn. To watch it scald and simmer and twist into ash. I push my chair back at the table and lean on my hands, as if in a courtroom.

“Are you going to help me or not, Tim? Because if you’re not...”

“Please,” he says. “I don’t think it’s right.”

There was a time when wild animals use to knock outside on our porch door in the winter and my father would say they were searching for warmth and he would buy cat food just for the opossums and raccoons and I would sit on his lap late in the nights watching those animals eating with little hands from the metal tins lined up on the porch.

“Come,” I say to him. I am reminded of his baby bird voice that morning before the reenactment. “It has to be done, whether or not either of us want it.”

I leave him in the kitchen and go into the converted living room gift shop to find a cardboard box. After Tim got bucked off and the reenactment shifted from historical to comedic, the T-shirts were snatched from the racks and even from the boxes. Guests had pulled the shirts on over their suits, button-downs, and other T-shirts until the boxes were empty and tossed into the dusty corners where I find them now. I grab the sharp flaps of two boxes and drag them, one bouncing off each of my thighs, back to Tim in the kitchen.

“Joy,” he says when I come in. “You’re being unreasonable. Unrational. Come on, just settle down a minute.”

But all I hear is chirp chirp chirp.

“Here,” I say, tossing one of the boxes so that it lands open at his side. “You take on the uniforms. I’m going upstairs.”

I turn and take my box to my parents’ bedroom, leaving before he can say anything to change my mind. Once I get on the stairs, I stop and listen for the squeak of the porch door. After I know he’s gone out to get the clothes, I move on up the stairs.

The box isn’t very big. It sits amid rumpled blankets on my parents’ bed, which I did not make this morning. Three of its flaps are taped together so that they stand upright—Brigget’s doing, I guess, since she’s so little and had a hard time reaching into the boxes when they were packed with folded T-shirts. One of the flaps is down. When I press on the mattress and lean to stare at the jewelry box on the vanity, the box flap wags at me. Just exactly as a dog tongue.

There was a time when my father took me to the shell of a house in the woods. He said terrible things had happened in that house, but I was not to be afraid of it. He said a woman had burned to death in that house—he asked, could I see those windows that were broken? He had been at the fire. He said he had tried to save that woman and that the blood on the broken window glass was his own. I remember black smudges, tongues running out from the shattered windows. I remember a tree growing through the roof. He said he'd only wished to be remembered as the man who pulled a woman like that from the flames. As a man who did something, who acted in the face of certain danger.

So I throw in the jewelry box first, because I am afraid if I wait to throw it in last that I will lose my nerve. Then I take all of the shoes in their closet and throw those in, too. I leave the box on their bed and go into my room and collect all of my clothing with the university logo and mascot on it. I stack my summer project, my portfolio of essays on General Sherman, on top of the sweatshirt. When I dump that armful in the box, my sweatshirt on top folds in such a way that the eye of the wolf mascot looks up in emptiness. His laminate face has deep cracks that follow the folds of the sweatshirt. I push down the clothes and make room for a stack of reenactment flyers on my dad's armoire. Next to the flyers is a lighter my mother uses for her bathroom candles. I tuck that into the pocket of my jeans. Then I lift the box from the bed and strip the covers. They burst over the lips and fall across my arms as I carry the box down to the porch, where Tim is waiting.

"Look," he starts. But I stop him.

"You didn't pack them," I say. Reenactment clothes wiggle their arms and legs over the railing of the porch. The Mom Cora dress waives stiff from dried mud. The buttons on my dad's Confederate uniform snap like teeth in the afternoon sun. Jemson's militia uniform clings to the railing as if by invisible hands. The clothes whisper, discarded flags torn and muddied by battle.

"I can't let you do this," Tim says. "Joy—I *love* you."

"Then help me," I say. He's left the other box by the porch door. I grab it and begin pulling the flimsy, handstitched clothes into it.

"I said, 'I love you', Joy. Did you hear me?"

“Yes,” I say. “Of course.”

“This is your opportunity,” he says. “You could let go of all of this.”

Exactly, I am thinking.

“Take that other box,” I say to him. “It’s heavier.”

I lift the box of reenactment clothes and move over to the stairs, taking each one with a hesitation because I can’t see the steps over the box. I can hear Tim’s footsteps on the wooden porch behind me as he brings over the heavier box.

Then we are across the pasture. The cabin seems to crouch against the trees, as if hiding along the lines of the creek. It’s so small. The eaves hang and sag and although the sun is out, the cabin itself is cast in shade. The wood looks wet and cold. Weeds—kudzu that Clint left behind—choke the supports of the cabin porch.

“Okay,” I say to Tim. “You can set that box in the cabin.”

“Where?” he asks.

“In the kitchen. It doesn’t matter. Anywhere.”

“Okay, but, Joy,” he says. “Joy—“

“Go on, I’ll follow you,” I say. And I do. We go up the steps and I feel them bend beneath my extra weight. The clothes are making the box smell of farmland, animal droppings, or hot trees in swamp water. It’s terrible.

Inside, the cabin is several degrees warmer. Our feet thunk hollow on the floorboards. Tim blinks and blinks and blinks against the darkness. The cabin does not, of course, have lights or water. He sets the heavier box down and takes mine from my arms, setting it on top of the heavy box.

“I remember you, that first time,” he says. He’s not looking at me. He’s looking at the bedroom with the straw matted bed. It occurs to me how perfect that bed is. “You were afraid. Afraid we would be caught. That your dad would find out you were with me. Do you remember?”

I remember lifting rotten slats of wood from the cabin floor when we started the renovations, soft splinters cracking wet from the logs that made the foundation. I remember the insides of the logs

separating hot and steam rising and my dad coming behind me to help lift the logs that were too heavy and having that sensation that I was strong with his hand beneath mine.

“And that whole first week? Do you remember that, Joy?”

“We stayed in bed until the sun touched the doorway,” I say. “Listening to the robins in the pine trees.”

“And I said, I had never met anyone else who understood history how I do,” he says. “And we discussed the impact of war and famine and how if one person sneezes—“

“The whole world can change,” I say.

“Don’t do it,” he says. “I couldn’t stand it if you did. Promise, Joy.”

I remember promise as fingers crossed behind Clint’s back, a wink of my mother’s left eye before going through a doorway, a handshake between my dad and uncle Vance.

“Okay,” I lie. “I won’t. Go on outside. I’m going to close the curtains in the bedroom.”

Tim eyes me suspiciously. His lips are pulled together.

“Alright,” he says. “Okay.”

Once I am alone, I slide the draft records from the back pocket of my jeans. It is only a photocopy, but Vance has promised me the original will never be seen by my dad’s eyes. This is the only proof. Outside of this paper, they were never soldiers. From my front pocket, I tug out the lighter from my parents’ vanity. It’s a short walk to the bedroom—my footsteps echo like a ghost climbing stairs in an empty house.

I light the folded corner of the draft record and hold it over the straw bed until the fire catches and the corner curls. Then I drop the photocopy onto the straw bed—a single hair of mine left from mornings wrapped up in Tim and blankets singes and twists beneath the flames. The fire hisses and smokes, threatens to go out. I am on my knees, blowing on the blankets until a burst of flame stretches into the dried straw mattress and the bed goes up in orange. I look once around the room—one window, heavy felt curtains, unfinished hardwood floors, the audible snapping of the straw mattress in flames—and I go out to Tim on the porch.

“No,” he says. I am trying to kiss him, I am stretching on my toes to reach his lips but he holds me off with his forearms.

“No!” he says again, louder. “You can’t take artifacts away from the future. You can’t do this. This is history—it doesn’t belong to you.”

But he doesn’t try to stop it. Fire expands into the kitchen. Dusk is coming and the cabin glows before us. I stop trying to kiss him. Through the open doorway, fire crawls up the stacked boxes. The arm of my dad’s general jacket falls in flames out of a burned hole in the box’s side. The sleeve disintegrates and the buttons pop onto the floorboards. Eventually, the cabin pulls the roof in and the fire screams upward into the night sky. Tim pulls his arms around my shoulders and kisses the top of my head.

Turkeyfoot

Feel. Pulls of coastal air ripple cotton plants, like fingers reaching through soft across my skin. Pines shift, bend, their roots blending stretching, growing into me. I am red or sandy or underwater, alternately. Those are the slaps of bare feet. I cannot hear the music chirps of birds—they tug at worms that rub against my insides, their little claws grasping into me. Hollow hooves, narrow wheels, scalding tar flattened by the weight of heavy tires, rubber soled shoes, a deer jumps from and to me, I hold bodies of bones as long as trees, and a skeleton of a mouse whose fingers end in needle points. It rains. Two people stretch a blanket and I pull against their bodies when they lie together. Fish twist, dive, drink in the current. I split against the sun in summers. A man turns a sprinkler to the grass above. At the same time, another man fingers a rock, chips away its edges into a fixed point. There is the crack of the spade, a coat of fall leaves, a woman running. Fire comes over and houses crumble. A child leaves a metal truck—it is a seed amongst doll eyes, buttons, marbles, coins. Build a box and I will reach into the corners to fill it. Take a footstep—do you feel me reaching up for your ankles? Do you know that you cannot run from me?