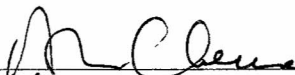


FATHERS AND SONS

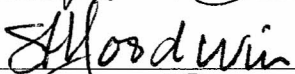
by

Erin M. McDaniel
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

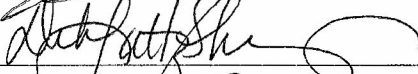
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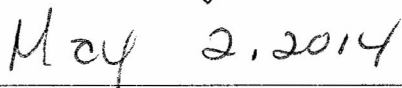


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Date:



Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Fathers and Sons

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Arts
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Alan Cheuse, Stephen Goodwin, and Kyoko Mori for their support and encouragement as I worked on this project. In addition to that of my professors, the kindness of Spencer Seward, Darby Price, Michele Johnson, Luke Huffman, and R.J. Hooker has been invaluable to me during my three years at George Mason University. I also would like to thank Dr. Geoffrey Munro, who introduced me to Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple in a course on persuasion and social influence in 2008, and without whom this project may not exist. Finally, I am thankful for the constant support of my parents, Joseph and Lisa, and for Alexander Gibbons, my first reader.

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ABSTRACT

FATHERS AND SONS

Erin M. McDaniel, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Dr. Alan Cheuse

This historical novella tells the coming-of-age story of a group of teenage members of Jim Jones's Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ. The novella, set in Jonestown, Guyana in the months prior to the Peoples Temple members' mass suicide in November 1978, follows five boys as they grapple with the knowledge that one of them has impregnated a young female Temple member. In addition to struggling with a mounting dissatisfaction with the organization, the boys must attempt to hide the girl's pregnancy from the rest of the Peoples Temple, whose fickle, confused, and oft-changing attitudes toward sexuality typically stay consistent at least in their condemnation of pregnancy.

This novella is an examination of the complexity of familial bonds, particularly those links that connect a father to his son. The novella tracks the development of these adolescent boys as they first struggle with the decision to accept the responsibility of fatherhood, and then, upon accepting it, how they manage their lives to comply with those responsibilities within a largely unforgiving society. Not only are the boys trying to

negotiate the physical and emotional newness of maturity, but they are also trying to do so within a society that has highly dictated sets of rules that control its inhabitants' behavior. They must also come to terms with that maturity after understanding that the man they have accepted as their father when joining the Peoples Temple is not the kind of father they want to emulate. Ultimately, this novel explores themes and answers questions not only about Jonestown but also about youth, about the transition into adulthood, about families, about friends, about men and women, about community and the individual, and about utopias (or, perhaps, dystopias).

FIRST TRIMESTER

Freddie brings it up for the first time one morning after breakfast—a dried-up English muffin, jam with no flavor, and that's it—when the five of us are cutting the grass. It's a slow morning. Despite having been up and about for a few hours since the wake-up call at six a.m., men, women, and children are still trudging around the compound, slow of step, staring bleary-eyed out at the hazy world. They walk circles around the main pavilion. They slog away from the small comforts of their living quarters. They stalk the perimeter of the compound, toeing the line between our attempt at civilization and the jungle's dark brink. At the edge of the open fields, the windmill blades loop a slow and endless circle.

We boys are in trouble again. We don't remember why. The list of grievances against us has now grown so long that it feels impossible sometimes to remember for which problem they are punishing us. We could be here because we fell asleep during last night's meeting, or because we loitered around the tap too long after filling our water bottles, or because we were singing Rolling Stones songs on the way back from the basketball court (*I can't get no*—and there some of us had picked up the guitar riff, *der der nerrr—sa-tis-fac-tion*). We don't know. We only know we are exhausted, and we are thirsty, and our brains are tired, and sometimes it feels like they'll make any little thing

we do into a reason to insult us, to hand us a dull pair of scissors and tell us to cut the grass and cut it faster or else Father's going to hear about it.

We can hear our Father speaking to us now. Every few minutes, a heavy cloud moves to block the midday sun, dropping shadows as dense as jungle air over the settlement. The faraway thump of a dribbled basketball and the impossible clapping of other boys' shoes over wooden boards punctuate Dad's voice, which calls out to us over the loudspeaker. *Hard work*, he says. *Hard work is the mark of a good community. There is a place for everyone, and everyone, everyone has his place here. We work now to make the heaven on earth we came here to find.* The cadence of his voice sounds like that of a man who's woken after a night of too much drinking: lazy, slow, strangely muddled.

A Temple member we've never seen before walks around us, kicking dirt up into noses and mouths. He makes sure we don't leave, or get up, or stop working. When he moves off to say something to the armed guard at a different part of the lawn, Freddie nods almost imperceptibly. We snip closer, edging toward the invisible center that holds us together.

Have you noticed anything funny about Sarah? he says.

What do you mean? we say.

I don't know, he says. He leans back on his haunches and runs a hand through his hair. I kind of think she looks bigger.

Our stomachs rumble, jealous.

Where would she find the extra food? we ask.

Freddie rolls his eyes. Not bigger like that, he says. He sniffs and wipes sweat from beneath his nose with the back of his hand.

Heavy boots step past us. We hunker down again. The blades of our scissors slice open and closed. We watch ants running across the dirt but think of sidelong glances we sometimes catch of Sarah on our way past the bakery. She always stands a little slouched, working eggs and yeast and flour with her fingers, moving ingredients from bowl to bowl. *You have to follow the directions just right or else you end up with a mess*, she says, her back to us as we peer in through the window. It gets hot in the bakery, and when the bread begins to bake and bubble in the oven, Sarah peels off one of her layers to reveal a little white shirt with thin straps that run across her freckled shoulders. *A camisole*, it's called, as in, *Hurry up and hand me back my camisole, we need to get dressed*.

Those are lucky days. We think of them here in the dirt and we can't hold the scissors right. We want to lie on our stomachs, our skin the canvas across which the trails of ants can draw their thin lines.

So? we ask, when the boots are gone again.

Bigger how? Charlie asks.

Freddie raises his thick eyebrows. Are you serious?

What's the big deal? we say.

Freddie leans back again. He holds one hand against his stomach and slowly extends it away from himself, his hand curved and fragile, as if cradling a beach ball.

He raises his eyebrows. It takes a moment for us to understand.

No, John says.

That's not possible, George says.

I thought she was taking pills, Charlie says.

Dad told us there are no more pills, Tim says. His head is still bent. He's trimmed his section of the grass perfectly, with each blade the same height as the next.

The heat of a sudden mistake flows up from our chests into our cheeks. Our hands sweat. Is Tim lying? Did Dad really say that? Did we sleep through that announcement? Did he say it in a meeting? Or in one of the news broadcasts? Again, our memories fail us. A low whine swallows our tired brains until we are incapable of thinking of anything else. *When did he say it?* we ask ourselves.

Mr. Muggs, Dad's pet chimpanzee, screams from inside his cage near the troolie cabins and we jump, still, even after these many months, not used to the constant jungle conversation. We push dirty hair out of our eyes. The boots start moving toward us again, in the direction of Muggs' cage, responding to whatever basic need he's crying about. *Must be nice, we think, to be so loved.*

If I had known she wasn't taking pills, we start to say.

I wouldn't have, we finish.

Freddie barks out a laugh, short and humorless.

Right, he says, and we can tell he knows we're full of shit.

At the end of the footpath leading through some shrubs and thicker grasses toward his house, our Father appears. He bends down, like us, but only to tie his shoes. His sleek black hair glints in the morning light. A few people surround him—mostly women, their

hands flittering through the air, playing close to his body—but they all look small when he’s finished knotting his laces and raises himself up and stands at his full height. We feel our muscles brace and tighten at the sight of him. We wait for that warm feeling that once drew us to his feet to envelop us and embrace our hearts. We wait. We keep waiting.

Well? George says, jolting us back to reality. Some of us drop our scissors.

Is she really? he asks.

And if she is, we say.

Then which of us is it? Freddie says.

The boots stop beside Freddie. We bend over, like, oh but yes we’ve been working this hard and not speaking all morning we promise, but it’s too late. The boots swing up and kick Freddie in the stomach and he falls forward into the dirt. They stalk off. They’ve said enough.

Freddie rolls over. It’s the million-dollar question, he coughs.

Yes, we think, it is. But what is a million dollars worth to us, in this place?

The tapes Jim Jones, our Dad—yes, *ours*, which means yours and mine and Freddie’s and Charlie’s and Sarah’s as much as his own biological children’s—sent back from the jungle had lied. A group of us—only children then, we now think, only fledgling birds tucked warm and away inside our little nest—would watch the raw footage of our new home, named Jonestown, for our Father. We would play the tapes once, rewind their reels, and play them again and again in a near-empty nursery in the back of our Ukiah Temple. In that time, the contents of the nursery, like most of our members, were already

packed and shipped south. Cold Northern California rain blew in through the cracked window, its white drapes billowing with the breath of the wind. Only the glow of the television lit the room. It threw our shadows onto white walls, made it so our stalking teenage shades leapt and jerked even when we held still. In the darkness, exotic images flashed on our 19-inch portable TV screen. There, on which Panasonic guaranteed that *blood is bloodier, fangs are sharper, and claws are crueler*, winked those hours of our Dad's promises.

Our obsession grew to the point that no amount of tape playing could satisfy us. At its breaking point, we learned it was time for us to go. With our Dad we left the Temple, left Redwood Valley, left America. We flew high above its soft brown earth, its ancient tree trunks, its wet green canopies. The whirling propellers of our airplane *thwackthwackthwacked* away the small *goodbye, goodbyes* we sent as parting gifts. We flew south, over the Promised Land, over our Eden, our plot of earth in the Guyanese rainforest. We felt the strange jungle heat pressing against the hot metal of the plane before we stepped out into it, too excited to remember how soon the sun would burn red into our bare shoulders, our pale knees, the thin parts in our hair. Our footprints left dry impressions in the dirt, wheeling in circles around the plane. Somewhere something smelled on fire; somewhere black smoke writhed up into the blue.

Dad stepped down last. He wore pressed khakis, a pink button-up, and a thin white coat. On the sunbaked strip of dirt cutting through the jungle, even the whipping jet-plane-propeller-wind left his black hair undisturbed; his bright white part ran straight and severe across his scalp, unburned. We had read our parents' packing lists, which said

we had to leave our dress clothes in the States; but, we reasoned, of all people, Dad would be exempt from our earthly discomforts of heat and humidity, which we felt so acutely now. *He looks like Elvis*, we thought, feeling pride swell in our throats and hearts. But we had no one to tell us we were thinking of the wrong Elvis, that the Elvis we knew was the sweating, swollen, bloated one who couldn't stand on stage without leaning on the mic stand, who couldn't speak to the crowd without slurring, who couldn't remember half the words to "Heartbreak Hotel."

Wind from the departing airplane brought short relief. When it left, again we felt choked, stifled, silenced, holding out hands to our faces to keep out the last of the fine and flying dirt. Thin beeping sounds squeaked behind us. From the driver's seats of white trucks, dark ladies waved to us, motioning back toward their truck beds. We lowered the backs and climbed up into the trucks, shifting from side to side on the burning metal. The ladies drove us dipping and rocking on the unpaved roads away from Georgetown and into the Jonestown compound. The corrugated metal roofs of our shelters burned whitehot with the reflection of the unclouded sun. Tent roofs flapped in the hot breeze. Seniors in shapeless dresses stood in rows beside the road, reaching toward the sky, swinging their limbs back down, touching the tips of their toes. Our Dad did not smile. Inside the cab, from behind dark aviators, he nodded at us, his face seeming to say, *This is safe. Here we will be safe, if nowhere else*. We could not wait to see what had been promised us.

When we asked for food, Dad walked us into the banana house. The structure had no walls, and its rafters stretched straight and true beneath the corrugated metal roof.

From the clean wooden beams hung our fruit, more than we had ever seen in one place, swinging half-green-half-yellow in the colorful transition from raw to ripe. Dad cracked one from beside its brothers, peeling away the yellow skin to expose the soft flesh underneath. When he snapped the peel away we leaned in toward him, watching to see if he would pluck and press the fruit between his fingers before he ate, or if he would lick his lips, or if he would leave the meat to attract lazy gnats and brown in the jungle sun. But Dad did not stop to contemplate. He bit, and when he bit his eyebrow cocked as if to say *I told you so. American bananas are nothing like these.*

When we asked for a place to rest, Dad took us first to the nursery. Inside, a mobile hung still in the heavy air. Dark-skinned children rolled around the floor. They held bright plastic toys up to us, and we took them, playing back. The soft smell of powder, of childhood, filled the room. When night fell, Dad led us through the darkness and opened the doors to our dormitory. We strained and craned around each other to see into our home. He pressed his palms into fat mattresses that we thought could sleep six of us, and he pointed to the lofts where our parents and neighbors would close their eyes side-by-side. We had never shared a bedroom with anyone but our brothers and sisters.

When we asked for a place to keep our things, Dad snapped the locks on our heavy trunk lids and revealed their bounty hidden inside: *rice, black-eyed peas, more peas.* One footlocker sat stacked with wrapped white bricks. *Kool-Aid*, he told us, *and icing, frost icing.* In many ways we were still children; we fidgeted, exchanged raised eyebrows, could taste the sugar melting redly on our tongues. *We're a happy family, yes we are*, our hearts sang, a tiny child-echo of the promises of our Father.

But now we know the tapes, and those first days, and our Dad, had lied. We know the sting of dirt whipping into our unshielded eyes, our pupils pinpoints in the jungle sun. We know Dad's sweating and bloating are not products of his environment. We know how it feels to sweat six person-shaped puddles into itchy bedclothes. We know who gets extra portions at dinner and we know it isn't us. We know what Elvis looked like in *Girls! Girls! Girls!* and we know he is dead in Graceland.

At night we make ourselves small and quiet enough to sneak past the pavilion, the sounds of singing dying in the night air, and behind the piggery, where fat sows lie on their sides grunting and making room for pink piglets to nose at their teats. Our feet slap at the concrete-hard soil as we make for the tree line. We watch our Dad prowling like a spooked horse along the bush, a machete in one hand and a pistol in the other. We wait. We want to see the mercenaries he says he's come to fight. Dad won't be left alone, so a group of guards flank him, tracking his movements. We flatten ourselves on the cement-dirt, closing our eyes like *If I can't see you, you can't see me* and pray that God will strike the fascists down. Our hearts pound through our chests into the earth, beating life into arid soil, but the trees stay jungle-silent. Our bodies lie on the ground: Some in a neat row, others twisted more haphazardly. Some on their backs, some on their stomachs, bellies rising and falling with short breaths. Some prone, some supine. Some holding each other, cold fingers interlocked in half-dead grass.

The next night at supper we eat soup, soup with chickens we had once watched dawdle and bump across their coop's dirty ground. Once, we had pressed our faces to the fence and peeked through its wire hexagons. The chickens had clucked softly when they

saw us, and when we squawked, they squawked back. But now our bellies rumble and we ask, *Where were they, Dad? The fascists you were hunting? The men you said have come to drag us to the concentration camps?* And from his table, Dad laughs, and he swears they cooked the mercenaries in the soup (*that's not chicken* he giggles), and we can't hold our dinner in our stomachs, and he laughs while we empty our insides onto the ground, and we think, *If God finds our retching funny, who are we to stop?*

We, you ask. Who are *we*?

We can tell you who we are, or we can let the files they keep say it for us. That way you can have an unbiased opinion—a little something more objective to lead you through this story.

Read the three-by-five notecards onto which Dad and his Planning Commission have reduced us. Read our medical reports, our family histories, our incident reports. Read the fake confessions they've made us handwrite and sign and seal into thick envelopes so we can never ever leave this place. Read what everyone knows about us. Read the things we've never said to anyone. Read the things we don't like to admit even to ourselves.

George: sixteen years old, five-foot-nine, born in San Francisco, CA. Joined the Peoples Temple when parents (Marcie and Roy) joined in 1974. No siblings. Separated from parents when arrived at Jonestown; parents deemed fit to run communal household with group of younger children. George in boys dormitory. Intelligent, strong, on work

crew. *I did not turn in my news article. There is so much noise around here but I cannot concentrate.*

And so on. Charlie (*I feel I don't work as hard as I should*), Tim (*I value friendship too highly, that's why I never make any complaints on the people I associate with*), John (*I'm too focused on my own father, I miss him even though I know I shouldn't*), Freddie (*I don't know how to keep a secret*), Sarah (*I feel that I am too family-oriented*). Our biggest mistakes are not accounted for: that we have been engaging in the sexual relationships they've said we may not have, that we have been having them with Sarah, and that we have—maybe—made her pregnant.

If Sarah is pregnant, and if she knows which one of us is the father of her baby, she isn't telling. We, a line of bandy-legged teenage boys on the work crew, start following her around the settlement like overgrown ducklings, kicking stones loose from the dirt, waiting for some kind of signal—did she just bat her eyelashes at John? Was she touching her stomach when she waved at Charlie?—but the South American sun keeps distracting us, playing off her dirty blonde hair, kissing pink burns across her thin shoulders. We search for answers. We find excuses to walk in full sun past the doctor's office when we know she's there, hoping to hear snatches of her soft voice floating out through the open windows. But she's always just delivering a load of clean hospital gowns, or stopping in to ask about a bug bite she itched too much.

We steal into her dormitory and flip the locks on her footlocker. Inside, we find a calendar; we touch the days she's marked with red Xs; we memorize the place in time where the Xs stop. We count backwards on our fingers. We never get the math right.

Sarah has long hair that toes the line between blonde and brown. When she's working hard, heaving wet masses of laundry out of metal tubs, or using a long poker to nudge bread around in the ovens, or running, her legs moving with the muscle memory of a high school sprinter (the fastest in her county, we learned), she ties it up high on her head in an elastic, revealing downy tufts of white curled at the nape of her neck. She holds her chin high almost always. We can see the places on her face where she'll get lines when she gets old: one straight line between her eyebrows (revealed when solving a crossword, reading a textbook, listening to a sermon); two parentheses cradling her mouth (appearing for a school picture, a dirty joke, a good song); three horizontal streaks across her forehead (etched in surprise on her thirteenth birthday, the loss of her childhood rabbit, when stuck in Oakland without the bus fare home).

To *want* something tangible—like bus fare, or a new pair of tennis shoes, or a plane ticket to Honolulu—was a rare feeling for Sarah, who has always known money. Her mother came from it and her father had steeped himself in local San Francisco politics since he came of voting age, working himself up through the twisted ranks from issuing ballots as a poll worker to cutting ceremonial ribbons as the mayor of his family's small town. When she turned sixteen and her friends started waiting tables, or fixing busted tires at the auto shop, or bagging groceries, Sarah wondered why her parents had never mentioned that she should get a job. Her They had encouraged her to put her

schoolwork first, sliding ten dollar bills into her wallet at the end of the week, or when she earned As on her report card (almost every quarter), or when they found one on the street. But still, something about the whole arrangement didn't sit right with her, and what she found herself wanting were not things she could hold or wear or spend, but answers. She wondered why her family had a housekeeper if her mother didn't work. She wondered why they had scoffed when she suggested spending her afternoons at a local daycare, even though she liked to see children, and help people, and had an easy way of talking to most everyone she met.

Other girls we know would have been okay with all that, but Sarah is not like other girls. Sarah surprised us because not too long after knowing her we realized (contrary to the belief we'd held since our mothers never burned a casserole or our teachers always came to school on time) that she is not perfect, which is to say that she is, just like us, human. For all her love of kids, Sarah holds a baby like you hold a sack of flour. Sarah can't do math unless she writes the problem down. Sarah lies through her teeth but feels guilty about it afterward, picking the callous on her index finger built up from years of holding her pencil wrong. Sarah has three older siblings but doesn't talk about them. Sarah can bake bread as well as she can kick a football. Sarah holds the door for people she doesn't know. Sarah would give her lunch to someone she doesn't know. Sarah would not jump in front of a bus for someone she doesn't know.

Sarah came to Jonestown for the same reasons any of us came: Because we wanted things most people could not give us. Because we wanted to make a difference. Because our parents had so much money and wasted it on teaching us how to play tennis.

Because we didn't have parents. Because we were sixteen. Because we were alone. Or because we felt alone. Because we needed a God to believe in. Because if we didn't need a God then we needed a cause. Because our Father seemed like that God or like that cause. Because he showed us how America is sick, and when we tried and couldn't fix it, we had to follow him to somewhere else where our work might mean something. To a new place. A good place. No place.

In this place we have catharsis meetings. Every Wednesday Dad gets us together and makes us confess our crimes. This is something we know Catholics do, but we are not Catholics, and even the Catholics we did know didn't do it like this. We have ideas of small rooms, locked doors, the smell of incense. We have ideas of privacy. We don't remember what privacy feels like.

Dad stands in front of us and calls Tim to the foreground, where Tim tells a story. I remember a dare I did when I was a kid that I still think about today, he begins. A girl in the neighborhood had caught a toad in the stream behind our houses and brought it out to the pavement where a few other boys and I were riding our bicycles in lazy circles. I stood on my bicycle, one foot on the pedals, one foot on the hot asphalt for balance. I shielded my eyes with one hand, squinting through the humidity. A cushion of hot air ballooned up off the blacktop, buffeted back down with the weight of the watery air. Sweat sat slick on my arms, wet without exertion.

The girl pushed her fringe out of her eyes. Okay, she said, and leaned back on her haunches. So I'll hold its legs down, and you all just go on your bike.

The toad reached out with its forearms. Its skin, dry and flaking, puckered in the heat.

I don't know, someone said.

Come on, it's not a big deal, she said. It's already dying. She poked the toad's belly with a finger; it barely flinched. You're really just helping it along.

If it's gonna die anyway, someone said.

We might as well, another boy said.

Right, said the girl. Pedal away, she told me. You're gonna need a running start.

I rode my bike up the street. It had a little incline so I knew I'd be able to get some good momentum going on my way back down. At the top of the hill, I stopped the bike again and took a minute to catch my breath. The hill wasn't that steep, but something was going on inside me, I don't know. From the top of the hill I could see my parents' house. I could see my mother watering flowers in the boxes she planted in our front windows. I could see my father trimming the low branches from the cherry tree in the front yard. Seeing them working together was making my heart go tight. I felt scared and sad and angry, angry at myself. Would they think it what I was about to do was worth it to be part of this group?

I knew the answer but also knew I couldn't act chickenshit in front of my friends. You have to understand that I'd spent the rest of my childhood trying to be in with them, knocking on their doors with no response, always getting picked last for ball games, getting my books knocked out of my hand on the way to school—pathetic—and this was my chance to cancel all that out, to prove something to them.

So I decided to blow it. I was pretty far away from the toad at this point and could barely make him out among the scattered rocks and pebbles thrown across the pavement. I aimed my bike tire just to the right of where I thought he was, and gave them the thumbs up, asking, *Is this okay? This is okay*, they signed back, returning my thumbs up and clapping their hands. So I took a breath, balanced, and took off to face death, to be Death.

My plan was to miss the toad on purpose, but the neighborhood kids couldn't know I did it on purpose. They'd have to think I missed accidentally, and I'd have to hope they'd have to think just *trying* to run it over was enough to prove I was worth it. So I'm going down the hill, as fast as I can, feeling air rush into my lungs, not breathing, my muscles are going crazy, I'm biking harder than I ever have before, just two inches shy of the right direction. And then, at the point of no return, the toad starts jumping, jumping right at my front tires. That thing that was on the brink of death two minutes ago is taking his final stand, his final leaps, straight into my front tire, the destroyer of worlds, and at the last second I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, I was ten feet from the backend of a parked pickup. I lost my balance and went down, slid right underneath the thing, bike and all. I still have the gravel in my knees today. For a second, I forgot about the toad, but right away they came running over to me. I missed it, they said. Shit, I said, and I didn't curse back then, so that was big. I did it so these kids had to know I was tough, and that I really meant to squash the thing into the pavement.

That was pretty serious, the girl says.

I came out from under the truck, stand up, pick up my bike. My knee was bleeding everywhere and I had little cuts all over my palms.

That was wild, I said. I thought I was in the clear until someone steps forward and thrusts a baseball bat into my bloody palms.

You've gotta finish the job, the kid told me.

The bat was aluminum. Lightweight. The same kind I had at home. The one I used to hit homeruns with.

Well? the girl said.

And all I could think about was how very light that bat was, and how very easy it would be to bring it up over my head and swing it down into the ground, and all the things I might destroy in doing so.

And then? someone asks.

Tim pulls the toothpick he's been chewing out of his mouth. Blood tips the end of the thin wood. They made the effort to talk to me for a few months afterward, but not for much longer. Guess those kinds of dynamics always find a kind of equilibrium again.

We remember a page of a textbook in the dorm bookshelf, *Introduction to Child Psychology*, wedged between *The Communist Manifesto* and Machiavelli's *The Prince: If a subject displays signs of cruelty and violence toward animals, especially during childhood, seek further consultation on a series of psychotic disorders*. We think of all the things we know about Tim: He is a good painter. He keeps his teeth clean. He plays

the piano in his sleep. He snores. He doesn't talk to his parents anymore. He can't grow facial hair.

How many goodnesses does it take to cancel out a badness?

What is our Dad's goodness to badness ratio? What is ours?

Is there any truth to that saying about the frog in the hot pot? That he doesn't know he's dying until he's cooked alive?

Why do we still have so many questions?

Long days pass with beating hearts and whirling thoughts. None of us wakes, lives, and sleeps without questioning each of our experiences in Jonestown. We all know each other's stories. Charlie did it with Sarah standing up in the shadows, in the darknesses between buildings where the searchlights can't stretch their fingers. George did it with Sarah on all fours behind the piggery, their sounds covered by the grunts of the sows eating inside. Freddie's story, about doing it with Sarah silently, in communal beds, flanked by sleeping Temple members, was for months our very favorite. But now, with the temptation of the truth sitting before us, those stories have lost their tang. We know that if she is pregnant, we are guilty.

The fear of *what if* and *who is* and *what if I am* hangs over us. Before he falls asleep each night George thinks of his ninth-grade psychology teacher. In that old and tired classroom that smelled like chalk he sat in the front row and watched her thin arms draw three thick lines on the board in the shape of a pyramid. His teacher ran the chalk through the pyramid in parallel lines, slicing it into five pieces. At the bottom, she

scrawled words like *food, water, sex* (George heartbeat picked up; a girl near him jiggled her foot; a boy in the back laughcoughed into his elbow), and *shelter*; at the top she'd crammed into the tiny triangle the words *abstract thought, self-actualization, ability to philosophize*, and other fifty-cent words George had to look up in the dictionary again when he got home. His teacher faced front and swiped chalk dust from her black pantlegs. *The way it works is, she began, if you don't have these things down here on the bottom, you'll never be able to reach the things on the top.*

At the time George had placed himself somewhere in between those extremes, somewhere in one of the middle sections, somewhere a person would fall if he were searching for *love, intimacy, or family connections*, his more base needs having been satisfied by a father who worked, a mother who cooked, and some magazines wedged between his mattress and its boxspring. Now, when George thought of himself, he wondered if it were possible to fall into a space somewhere below Maslow's hierarchy, someplace he hadn't yet defined. Fear's cold hand held his heart in its fist, reminding him that *oh but you do have some food, and you do have some kind of a thing called shelter, and you have had—you have had—you have.*

There's no way to know for sure but to just ask her, someone says. Or we could just wait and see, says another. But how do you ask without someone hearing you? we wonder. The last time one of us asked something out of turn (*How much longer do you think we'll have to sit here and listen to this?*), said George somewhere around the halfway point of a nighttime meeting held not long after the entire Peoples Temple had

settled in Guyana), we'd been overheard, and ratted out, and delegated to work worse jobs on worse hours than those already prescribed to us.

When all of our tested methods have failed, we revert to older methods of divination, hoping that they will give us some kind of truth: We spin bottles. We play rock-paper-scissors. We draw straws. We play poker, not sure what kind of award to grant to the winner, not sure what kind of consolation prize to offer to the loser.

Tim likes these games the least. Tim doesn't much question what they tell us, that sex—a thing so out of reach for us, yet clear as day—reflects our ego, that ego destroys a utopian society, that it's antithetical to bring children into our imperfect world. When we met Tim we thought we had a lot to learn from the boy who followed Father's packing instructions so well, who arranged the items in his trunk—cotton summer tops, soap, underwear, work boots, a wind-up alarm clock, a small notebook with a black and white photo of his sister and brother—so efficiently. He had done this better than any other Temple member, who frustrated the Planning Commission with their footlockers overflowing with heavy books, unnecessary suit jackets, rolls of toilet paper, all damp and swollen from surface travel. That was what we thought. But now John calls him a pussy, says, *Don't you think it was worth the risk?* And he looks somewhere out the window, listening, maybe, for the sound of Dad's voice calling us to dinner, or to what he calls prayer, and we feel a new and cold distance growing between ourselves and this boy with whom we have worked, spoken, slept, and aged.

We never resolve any of our questions; yet, we never go to bed angry—a lesson passed down by our mothers. In the silence of our hearts, we wonder, we ask, we know,

what does it matter which of us is the father of the child? What does any of it matter when the only Dad who counts for anything here is Him?

In lives before this one, we called other men Dad. We left these lives behind in San Francisco, left these men waiting at the end of dark halls of memory. Only the faint impressions time has left on our young bodies remind us that we once were someone else: California-blond hair, Midwestern vowels and cadences, muscles lean from free-throw shooting, scars on once-skinned knees. In those lives, our fathers sat us in hot plastic seats, watching men throw balls, swing at strikes, tag out, hit homeruns. Our fathers took us by our small hands to help us cross the street. Our fathers trimmed dark brown mustaches, taught us how to shave. Some of our fathers barely knew us; some came home too late, or worked too long, or didn't work at all. All of this before they led us here, or we left them to come here ourselves.

In Guyana we live in a perennial summer with a father who says he will provide for us, will save us, will lead us toward heaven. Other fathers brought us into the world; he is the father who will lead us out. We remember the other men like we remember dreams, at the most ordinary moments: when we wipe toothpaste onto flattened bristles, when we wave through heat haze at a friend standing in the pavilion, when we peel the yellow skin away from a banana and eat it up, trying to feel full. The other men wait for us at the end of memory's dark hallways. We do not go looking for them. We cannot let ourselves go looking for them. We sense danger there, in memory; we taste that feeling

you can't name that tells you *run* or *stop* or *go back* when the world needs you to do it. In this season that never ends, our new Father is supposed to be enough.

Here then, to memory succumb:

A long-ago Sunday afternoon. Charlie's father's driven him and his siblings home from church and left again to watch the Bears game, playing at a bar in town with a television. The sounds in the kitchen hum up and down while Charlie's mother starts dinner and talks with Mrs. Black, their neighbor down the street. Now the boy, his father's namesake, plays with his sister and brother, only a few months old, small for their age. They laugh, their arms flailing and jerking and kicking. They make him laugh. His father can act like caring for the babies is a job sometimes but it never feels that way to him. He dangles a stuffed Dalmatian in front of them and their blue eyes follow it. Once, their heads could fit in the palms of his hands like apples. When they fall asleep, he moves them to their twin Moses baskets. He dabs the spit from under their lips. He touches their feet, smooth and pink without the tough marks of age.

Back downstairs, Charlie sends bright toy cars flying down the hardwood hallway until they wreck right outside the kitchen. He slides on his knees toward them, wearing out the knees of his church slacks. Inside the kitchen, Mrs. Black fans herself with the folded-up sports section. All the windows in the house gape at the cloudless day, and a hot wind billows inside the blue curtains on the half window over the sink. Charlie's mother leans there, against the counter, her elbows bent back. At the table, Mrs. Black

has done her blouse up to the highest yellow button. She stops talking when Charlie comes in, as if he's interrupted her.

Hello there, she says, her voice sugarsweet. She digs around in her bag, which seems like the size of a kids' swimming pool. Would you like a lolly?

Charlie pulls the wrapper off the red candy and runs it over to the trashcan.

What do you say? Charlie's mother says, running her hand through his light hair as he drifts by.

Thanks, Charlie says. He sucks the lollypop and drives his cars along the lines in the linoleum, smudged with little stuck-on flecks of grey dirt.

The room, humming with their low voices just a moment before, stays quiet. Charlie's mother collects teacups from the table and begins to rinse them in the sink, the dark tea dregs lightening in the bottom of the cups. Mrs. Black adjusts herself in her chair, her thighs making tacky sounds as they unstick from the plastic cushions. Her back, rumpled and rippled with too-tight underclothes, faces Charlie.

Anyway, she finally blurts, by the time we left the meeting, she says, we hardly remembered who we came to see in the first place.

They're supposed to save the best for last, aren't they, Charlie's mother says, untying her apron, knotted at the small of her back. Whether it's a sermon or a singing show, she says, they always want to keep you there until the very end.

I guess they'll remember who's the best in the future, Mrs. Black says. The Reverend Jones!

Mrs. Black smiles, picks up the comics and starts fanning herself with those, too.

And the music was beautiful. Just so well-timed, and full of life.

We like the music at our church, Charlie's mother says. Daniel can't sing at the practices as much anymore, on account of his throat, but he likes to help conduct and teach the new ones how to keep time.

Charlie hears *throat* and his own closes up. He knows that word, has heard it slip from his mother's mouth in quiet conversations with his father and in stilted conversations with him in his bed at night, and he knows the kinds of connotations it carries: connotations like *sick*, and something to do with his father, and maybe *dying*. Charlie's absentminded hand lets one of his cars roll away, coming to a quiet stop under the table and out of his reach. It bumps to a stop into one of Mrs. Black's Mary Janes and she kicks it away.

The Reverend was amazing, Mrs. Black breathes, not listening. He *knew* things, Mary. He knew phone numbers and addresses and medical conditions and anything else you can think of about a person.

Charlie's mother balances the teacups in their place in the cabinet. Sounds suspicious, she says.

It's not *suspicious*, it's *divine*, Mrs. Black says.

There's a fine line there, though, don't you think? Charlie's mother closes the cabinet and shrugs.

What do you mean? asks Mrs. Black.

Charlie's mother looks down at him briefly before she goes on.

I mean, it's largely a matter of opinion when you and I are both looking at something we can't explain, and you decide it's special because God made it so, and I decide it's simply funny that things turned out this way. That we couldn't have made it happen that way if we tried.

What does this have to do with the Reverend Jones? Mrs. Black asks.

I'm just *saying*, said Charlie's mother. It's strange that he knows all those things about a person, but there might just be an explanation for it you haven't thought about yet.

That *I* haven't thought about yet.

Not just *you*, Bertie, I mean an explanation that *anyone* has really thought about yet.

Mrs. Black goes to sip from a water glass, but there's nothing left in the bottom of her glass.

I bet you'd change your mind if you just came to see him, she says.

I told you, we like our church. The pastor is a kind man and the community is very supportive. The women have been offering to watch Charlie and the twins when we've had to spend the night in the hospital for Charles' visits.

Marjorie says she's seen Reverend Jones cure cancer.

There it is. The other word Charlie knows and doesn't know. The worse word. The word that signals a kind of end of something.

Charlie's mother keeps drying the dishes with a checkered hand towel.

Mrs. Black presses on. She says, Marjorie says she saw a man spit out a growth right in front of her. That Reverend Jones used his words and his faith to help him pass it. It was thick and hairy and just the worst thing you could imagine.

Charlie's mother stops drying the dishes. The curtains deflate around her and rustle against the sill, lined with blue flowers.

I didn't want to have to tell you that, Mrs. Black says. I wanted you to be interested in your own right, and find out on your own about the healings at one of the meetings, but I wasn't sure what else to say, or how else to get you there. I didn't want you to think I was just telling you about the cancer to trick you—

Who said anything about being *tricked*?

Charlie stops driving the cars around.

Both women look down at him.

Go check on your sister and brother, Charlie's mother says.

I'm only saying, Mary—

How could you bring that up now? she whispers.

Don't you know what it could mean for them? For your family? Mrs. Black says.
For your kids?

Go! she says.

The cars fall out of Charlie's hands and he hears Mrs. Black's thighs unsticking and he slides away on his socks down the hardwood floor. Upstairs he hears his sister and brother crying, and when he first (but really second) hears Jim Jones' name he

remembers this day, and he doesn't know why he should remember it unless it had to be important and he knew, that even back then, this was fated for us.

That fact about our fates is a thing we figured out early on. We also figured out early on that giving—what our Dad would and will ask us to do with each of our moments on earth—has got two sides to it. On one side, giving is you. You can give of yourself with your time, your body, and your mind. George can push a ladle deep into a green bean casserole, scooping out hot food covered in mushrooms and fried onions. Steam can rise from the mass he sets down on a woman's plate, which sags under the weight of so much food. Charlie can stay away from drugs for two years and they can hand him a college education, which he can turn around and use in service of the Peoples Temple. Sarah, who stands three feet taller than the children, can work in the orphanage, can teach them to sing the praises of our Father, can hold their small hands. A box of food can float across the bay to the Indians at Alcatraz. A Cocker Spaniel can dig holes in its new owner's manicured lawn. A little black boy can swim in a heated indoor pool. A little girl can laugh atop a brown pony.

So we give of ourselves because we believe in something bigger than ourselves. You can call him *God* or you can call him *Dad* or *Jim Jones*; no matter the name we believe in him and our hearts feel so full that at these all-day services on Thanksgiving and Christmas we would sing with the choir and faint with our friends and barrel down the aisle (over and across the bodies mashed together smiling and laughing and clapping) to proclaim our love for him.

But on the other side—a darker, less breathless, frighteningly simpler side—giving is money. It's the money we asked for from our constituents when we sent out Temple bulletins and pamphlets. It's the money we felt we owed our Dad after he paid for our college educations. It's the money we gave to him which we promised we would never want back. *Take care of those in the household of faith*, they said, so we said it, and we supported our own brothers and sisters with our money: We bought ice cream (mint chip and vanilla sliding and drooling down our hands) from the man who locks the Temple doors at night, and we asked our mothers could they start buying dresses from Mrs. Eames, the woman who organizes pamphlet distribution, and we started tithing: first ten percent, then twenty, now fifty, and now—now—. We signed papers saying *I am fully aware of, and I fully believe in the ideals and standards of this church, and of its pastor, Jim Jones. Because of this belief, and my faith in its humanitarian works, I have donated and given, and will in the future donate and give, certain items and monies to this church to be used as said church or said pastor sees fit.*

In California, John had this bum he always passed on his way to class, who used to sit hunched over on a box of his only things, wearing the same brown and weather-mottled clothes he'd worn for months, asking for change. One day it was raining and John (instead of ignoring or speeding up or pretending to read the paper) says *I can give you a sandwich* and hands the man the peanut butter and jelly he made himself for lunch, cut on the diagonal, wrapped in wax paper. The man tosses the sandwich into a plastic grocery bag. Dirty water pooling in the bottom of the bag leaks into the cracks between the wax. John walked on but he knew if the man left it like that the crusts would go

soggy, the bread would turn to mush, and the jelly would melt between the man's fingers. He pivoted, drops of rain shearing off his jacket as he turned. But before John could speak, he saw the bag tossed into the street, the man with half his foot pressing into the sandwich, his hands held out to the next passerby: *Spare some change, sir? Spare some change?*

You can only do one thing with a sandwich, or a heated pool, or clean button-down, or an abandoned yellow Labrador, or yourself. But money gives you more than that. It gives you flexibility. Money gives you a way out. We turn our pockets inside out, smile, show you what we've given, what we have left.

One afternoon Freddie finds us working on some structural repairs to the East House. We stop our hammering—the *one-e-and-a two-e-and-a one two three four* rhythm we have patented crumbling with our distraction—and drop our tools to watch him approach. Freddie holds a little boy, about five or so, by the hand. He touches the boy's fingers lightly, holds him at a distance, like he's sick, like he's contagious. It doesn't take long for us to figure out why: A dark stain wets the front of the boy's jean shorts.

What's going on? we ask.

Why did you bring him here?

Freddie squints.

They said I should bring him here to wait.

Wait for what?

The boy stares at the tree line, not reacting. Like we aren't there.

Our hearts flutter. We tense up. Our minds race. Tim tries to go back to hammering.

Can't you take him to the bathroom? John asks.

Or his dorm or something?

Don't think so, Tim says, driving a nail into a two-by-four.

Freddie puts a hand up to shade his eyes. Besides, he says, Dad's already on his way.

We look out over the fields of coffee. Our eyes have stayed focused on the up-close wood so long that Dad seems especially far away. His bright red shirt is a fleck of color in the distance. He gesticulates, talking to a teacher over outside the education tent. Soon they come toward us, flanked by armed guards. As they approach, we see that they wear sunglasses and do not smile. Tim keeps hammering, a lock of stray hair tapping into his eyes.

As they draw toward us, we sense that other workers are beginning to converge here, too, young ones, like us. Boys we know on the wood crew, some of the younger servers, a few vegetable workers who prep food in the kitchens. Some of the girls from the bakery, including Sarah, walk in an inverted V toward us. Sarah forms the point at the back of the triangle. Our hearts go tight with what we think we know about her, with what we think we know about us.

One of the bakery girls gets down in the little boy's face. Do you know why you're here? she asks. Her hair is pulled back tight into a bun. Her lips are smug,

simpering. We push our hair out of our eyes. Sarah hunches a little more than usual, uncomfortable.

You're here because you wet yourself in class, didn't you? she says.

The boy sniffs.

Ben was teasing me, he says.

Who is Ben? asks a wood crew boy.

Don't worry about Ben, the teacher says. She, Dad, and the guards complete the circle around the boy that we have formed without realizing it.

The boy looks up at the teacher and for the first time shows emotion; he starts to cry.

I didn't do anything wrong, he says.

Dad laughs. Didn't do anything wrong? he asks, the vowel in *wrong* long, drawn out, cascading over octaves to make the boy sound stupid. You've gone and, and embarrassed yourself, son! You let, you let another boy push you around, and now you've made yourself look like a fool because of it. We can't have that. We, we can't have that. We're all supposed to *love* one another!

From the back of the group, someone shoves Charlie forward. We know what this means. Charlie fidgets. His mannerisms in this moment—the fidgeting, the head scratching, the nerves jangling in his arms—remind us of the child who stands before him. A few voices call out something encouraging to Charlie but he stays still. They get louder, shout, saying *Come on, Charlie*, or *Do it, do it, do it!* or *Hurry up!* and suddenly Charlie flinches and shoves the little boy to the ground. The boy cries and falls down, dirt

clouding up around him. We itch when the dirt dust settles into the open sores on the boy's skinned knees. We try to remember who was the person in our lives who once told us that the itching comes from the sores healing, but we cannot remember.

Charlie, a different person now, an animal burned into action by the yelling and the prompting and the pressure, pulls the boy up and spins him around, and here we remember: field days, softball fields, pressing our foreheads to the ends of wooden bats and spinning around and around and around. *Dizzy bat*, we called that game. Our brains relish in teasing us with these memories from the time before. They hand them over so casually, like they are nothing more than a pen or a dishtowel. They twist our insides into knots, bring hot tears to our eyes.

A guard shoves himself into the small fray and gives Charlie a bandanna. He ties the fabric tight around the boy's eyes, whose head jerks when Charlie knots it behind his head. The boy moans but does not resist. Now he stands there, his arms slack at his sides. His small knees sag and he wavers in the morning heat. Dad moves forward, puts his hand on the boy's shoulder, holds him steady. Our chests get tight, like we're the ones in trouble.

Now, now this, this is what happens if you wet yourself, Dad says, his speech jumpy, flicking from word to word and point to point like a metal ball in an arcade game. You're so, so lucky you have your Father here to care for you and teach you right from wrong. You need him, you do, don't you know that? You wouldn't be here without him.

Dad nods at the teacher, who takes the boy by the arm, gently at first, and then suddenly not gently at all, tugging on him, pulling him forward toward the treeline. The

boy cries out. We hear the teacher taunting the boy as she pulls him into the woods, her voice and his cries growing faint as they move away through the bush: *Here's what happens if you make mistakes and you don't have your Father around to protect you!*

With the little boy gone, Dad turns to us. You are old enough to do this now, he says. This is your, your—responsibility. We take care of each other. The big kids take care of the little kids, and, sometimes, taking care, taking care means a little bit of tough love, means teaching them right from wrong in a diffi—a difficult way.

The teacher comes out from the tree line alone, pulling green leaves from her hair. She turns her back to us, looking deep into the jungle green.

Here they co-ome! she calls.

Some of us don't think twice about what's supposed to happen next. We barrel into the bush, whooping and hollering, crashing through foliage to find the soiled son. But even if we question this we are not supposed to show it—we are not supposed to show disobedience, or to show fear—and we follow. We scream and yell until we find the boy, until we can't recognize each other anymore, until we can't recognize ourselves. The little boy lies on the ground, shaking, holding his hands over his head. We stand above him and scream and scream. This is what happens, we cry out.

Yet, in that moment before that something in our muscles twitches and makes us run into the woods with all the rest, we see Sarah, who wraps her arms around herself, holds onto her stomach, and we wonder, if they knew what was growing inside her, would they do it to her, too?

Of that, we can't be sure. *We're all in the same group*, they say. *This is a socialist collective. We're all equal here. Look at what Father did for you.* But what Father gives you he can just as easily take away. And when you sign on to receive Father's gifts, you sign on to bear the weight of his punishments, those that fall on your shoulders and those that fall on others. You become complicit. You agree that these things that happen are okay and that you support them even while the blood speeds through your veins and you feel sick with what you're doing and what you don't have the strength to stop.

Also, someone's lying to us, because if this were a socialist collective we would *all* have to spend some time folding and unfolding the chairs in the pavilion, and we would *all* have to carry buckets of water balanced on a bending stick around the compound, and we would *all* have to recite lectures praising our Dad to the kids old enough to understand what we're trying to tell them, which goes something like this: *There is a prophet in our day who unquestioningly proves that he is sent from God. He has all the gifts of the spirit as given in the Bible: Word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues. We must have a prophet who is living the Christ life to direct us in this hour.*

Ha-ha, we think now. No. We know better than that. There's a place for everyone and everyone's in his place.

On top are the Staff. They are the eight women closest to Dad. We envy their proximity; they surround him like the fog that masses beneath a mountaintop; they cling

to him like the cat fur on our mothers' woolen sweaters; they speak to him in a language we cannot understand. The Staff are Dad's earworms. They are the answer to this question: *How does he know?*

How *does* he know? How does Dad suddenly know about Grandma's bad heart? And how does he know about the bloody red numbers spattered on our parents' bank statements? And how does he know we're good at most everything that matters but we haven't studied history enough—what's wrong with us there, he wonders, what does that suggest about us?

He knows because they followed us, because they spied on us, because, in their silence, they lied to us. They watched us when we thought we were on our own. They showed up at our parents' houses uninvited, snuck upstairs while no one was looking, and read her diary. They mashed up chicken livers and rolled them up with a ball of human hair and held the reeking mass up to the crowd (screaming, fainting) and called it *cancer*, cancer extricated from a healed body. They collected our mail; they opened, read, and sealed the tea-stained letters from our grandmothers in New Orleans, ripped-in-half bank statements, report cards (A, A, A, B, B+).

We yearn to rush forward and push up their masks but we are afraid to reveal the truth (*SURPRISE!*): that the staff are the ones posing as the men “passing tumors” during the faith healings; they are the women learning to walk after breaking their backs in traffic accidents; they are the people we trust(ed). We yearn to ask our Father frankly *Are you God*, but if you are not God, then *Does God tell you what to say*—but the Staff tells

you what to say, so then *who is God*. These questions go unanswered, spinning and spinning and spinning in our brains.

Below the staff comes the Planning Commission, the hundred or so people with educations, brains, smarts, etc. who do the day-to-day work involved in running the Temple. They use their minds to advance our goals. They stay up until three a.m., falling asleep in their chairs, facing threats of death for their distraction.

The rest is grunt work for us—the troops. If you're on top and you need chairs set up, you ask the troops to start unfolding. If you need exposure for the Temple, you ask the troops to print pamphlets and slide them under windshield wipers. If you need money coming in, you ask the troops to find it inside someone's pockets. The troops are dark-skinned and desperate, but they feel Dad has included them, and again it's these abstractions that win over reality.

Everyone worries about his place on the mountain. Everyone wants to grasp the summit, that something higher than the low-hanging fruit they feel they reach. Now we know that everyone should pull back, bring stretching tiptoes back to earth, and hold onto himself, the only fruit you can trust not to taste like poison.

We finish our work late. They schedule it like this on purpose, we think. They impose arbitrary periods of silence on us and don't let us eat until we're finished everything—which, for them today, is at midnight, a mere six hours before we're meant to wake up and work again. We missed the meeting, or the children's night, or the movie, or whatever the other thousand members did—were allowed to do—this evening. By the

time we return to our dormitory, most of the encampment is asleep. We are asleep on our feet. A dim light still shines in the radio shed, where a man's shape sits hunched over a board of controls and dials, swallowed up in the vacuum of static and sound that plays through his headphones. We envy him. Dad's voice crackles over the loudspeakers posted throughout the camp: *Do not let your ego stand in the way of the good of the group*, he says. *We preach abstinence because all sex is born from ego, and ego is the seed of capitalism, the disease poisoning the lifeblood of this socialist community.* This late in the day, the cadence of his voice is lazy, slow, strangely muddled. Parts of this sermon sound familiar to us; we felt as though we've heard them before—at a security meeting, or while eating lunch, or asleep, or in a dream—but we can't place where.

We smell a thunderstorm moving over the tree line and into the encampment. We feel the growing intensity of air and heat and moisture that precedes a heavy rain and makes once-broken bones ache. We stop to rub small circles with our thumbs into our joints. Despite the pain it brings, the coming of the rainy months reminds us of the change in seasons, something that has not followed the Peoples Temple to Guyana from the United States. It reminds us of a life we lived in which the days didn't blend seamlessly into one another, separated only by a curtain of darkness, a life when a man could mark time by changes in the temperature, or the quality of light as it played in through a bedroom window.

Near the dark pavilion, a man and a woman stand side by side, the beam of their flashlights focused on something on the ground. The woman leans close to the earth, her hands pressing down on a coffin-like box set into the dirty ditch. The man keeps his foot

on top of the box as he reads in a monotone from a small handbook. *Stealing from community stores hurts all and helps none*, he said. *Father sees and knows all, and Father punishes those who put themselves before the rest*. We press on, trying to ignore the muffled crying coming up from beneath the dirt, trying not to wonder who is inside.

At the playground, two Internal Security Patrollers sit on the swings, smoking cigarettes. The orange glow at the tips of their cigarettes dips and sways with their gesticulations.

Evening, one says.

You missed roll call, the other says.

Hurry back now, says the first.

We walk on in shadow to our dormitory, which we share with other boys our age, who in these past few weeks have suddenly begun to seem years younger.

In the early morning darkness a man slinks in through the unlocked dormitory door and we wake. The man tiptoes toward John, who sleeps on the edge of a bed beside three other boys. Their bellies rise and fall and their legs lay splayed across the straw-stuffed mattress. The man rubs John's shoulder until he wakes. We watch the scene through half-closed eyes.

Who's there? John says.

You always say that, says the man.

Dad? John asks.

It's your dad, says the man, and we know it is John's real father who stands above him now. We recognize the way he stands, scratches his head, crosses his arms. We've

seen John make all the same movements, only slightly miniature versions of the stances and shapes we see in the dim light now.

Groggy, John rises to his elbows. His glassy green eyes focus on his father. We're all sleeping, he says.

I wanted to see you earlier. I had to stay out late to finish something. John's father sits down on the wooden floor and his knee pops. Your head's warm, he says.

I'm hot.

It's not warm like that. Not like normal.

Worry trickles into our hearts. John swallows. He does a thing with his mouth like he's thirsty.

I can try to get you medicine tomorrow.

John exhales. He lowers himself down to the bed.

I came looking for you earlier but you weren't back yet, his father says.

Got back late. John yawns.

What did you do today? his father asks.

I worked, John says.

What did you do? Who did you work with?

He goes to push John's hair out of his eyes but John swats his arm away. The worry in our blood changes its name to *jealous*, to *indignant*, to *heartbroken* and *alone*.

John pushes hair out of his eyes. He gesticulates around the cabin.

Them. Everyone. I really can't remember right now, Dad.

His father pauses. What did you do when you got back? he asks after a minute.

Went to bed, John says.

The man leans against the sideboard and closes his eyes. *One of our goals is to teach the children that integrity and loyalty are desirable qualities*, they had told him on the day we all arrived together. *Your son will be happy with his rainbow family. They will raise him well. He will live with living examples of those virtues.*

And I am not? he had asked, and their faces told them the answer.

We had watched them shuffle through some papers. *You at least serve as a testament to another of our tenets: that mankind holds the keys to his own destiny. We're just not sure a destiny like yours is ideal for your son.*

We're not sure that we knew what they were talking about then. We didn't know John well enough yet at that point to know that his father had once been addicted to drugs, gone to jail, divorced his mother, or that the Peoples Temple was the thing that allowed John to escape the downtrodden family from which he came and become a part of one that could prove they loved and supported him. Before long, John's new Dad got his fingers around the wrist of his old one; they got him clean, let him see his son again, and brought the both of them here. And then they separated them again. *Divide and conquer*; we know that phrase. If they'd said it like that to begin with—

Here, in the dormitory, from his pocket the man took out a banana and slips it under his son's pillow. Don't let them say you didn't have a father who provided for you, he says on his way out the door, loud enough for all to hear.

We wake again, sometime in the night after John's father—his real father, the one who looks like him, who shares his blood—has gone back to his own dorm. We hear a crying. Initially we think it's maybe a younger boy who has snuck in to sleep with his brother, but it's too high pitched, too mature, too familiar. When the next bolt of lightning flashes in, we see each other sitting up, awake. We wait until thunder rocks the dormitory to make gross movements, to roll off of our mattresses, to wrest waterproof jackets from our footlockers, to open and close the wooden door. We leave Tim in the dormitory where he lies with a pillow over his eyes.

Under cover of darkness, we dip and bend and weave around guards, running after the sound of the cries—so strange here and out of context—until we find her, wet and naked in a heap twenty yards or so into the jungle. Even in this jungle blackness, we can see her stomach and we finally know. Freddie was right: Sarah is bigger. Her abdomen is like an egg, fragile and round, strangely beautiful in its impossibility. Her red skirt sits in a wet swath around her legs. She holds a flashlight in one hand, pointing its beam at a compass in her palm.

Why aren't you dressed? we ask, yelling so she can hear us over the crashing of the rain.

I read this article, she says. She wipes her nose. In a magazine I found. She nods to indicate a waterlogged mess of pulp on the muddy ground. It said the wire in your bra messes up the way the needle points.

She looks up at us incredulously.

The underwire is a *magnet*, she says.

Her little bra sits at the center of a patch of grass. Two yellow stains ring the white fabric around the armpits. George pokes the underwire with a tentative finger. Absurd, we think, to now feel so afraid to touch something we've held, unclasped, and removed so many times.

Are you sure it's working? George asks.

Mostly, Sarah says.

She pivots her wrist left and right. She looks up at the sky, squints.

I wish I could see the stars! she yells. I want to go see the stars!

Rain blurs her face and streaks faint mascara lines across her cheeks. We look up, too, despite ourselves.

You won't be able to go anywhere in this weather, we finally say.

She drops the compass into the wet grass.

I want to go home, she cries.

We can't go home, we say.

I know that.

That little boy, she says. That little boy.

We want to reach out to Sarah, to hold her, to comfort her. But we've found no comfort ourselves in what we've witnessed, in which we've participated, and thus we have nothing to share. The rain roars down around us.

We can't help him, we say.

I know that, too.

With anger and frustration she pivots her hand *left right left right* before tossing the metal piece away into the grass.

We fidget. We scratch the scruff on the back of our necks. We try to speak to each other without speaking. We practice this every day—in front of the work crew leaders, in front of our dorm mates, in front of Dad—but, in this moment, we’ve forgotten that. We think, *our bodies have failed us*, until we look down at Sarah’s stomach and see their great success.

But we can help yours, one of us says.

And we can help you, says another.

Sarah looks down at herself without embarrassment. She gasps, stifling a sob.

If they find out about this, I don’t know what I’ll do, she says. I don’t know what *they’ll* do. I don’t want to find out.

We won’t find out, we promise. Not to you.

Wet with rainwater, Sarah’s brown hair hangs long and heavy in front of her chest. She gives us many opportunities to look wherever we please, to see the things we rarely see exposed in any kind of light, but we can only see the *thank you* in her eyes and the egg of her belly, making her seem more beautiful than we have ever imagined.

Not long after this discovery, in what we learn to be Sarah’s third month of pregnancy, we get visitors. *Russians*, Dad says, but no matter what kind of visitors we’re getting, *visitors* means we have to make the place look nice. *Visitors* means we’re back on the ground again, cutting grass. *Visitors* means we’re doing something about the box, hiding

it, maybe, doing something to pretend like we don't have a need for a solitary confinement chamber. We're pinching ourselves to stay awake for Dad's nightly news reports, straining to hear him over the loudspeakers. We do this in case one of the visitors interrogates us, asks us questions about current events, or how we're feeling in the community. *Just fine*, we plan to say. *Father takes care of us*, we practice. Those of us in the choir sing until our throats are raw. Tim, a tenor, prepares by refusing to talk outside of practice. Afterward he drinks chamomile tea with lemon from the same tea bag all night, reading and rereading the words to his hymnals, keeping time, tapping his foot against the floorboards while the rest of us try to sleep.

The visitors come in from Georgetown, and, for them, Dad is perfect. His voice doesn't sound like the voice of a father who slouches off to bed after a night of too much drinking. Instead, he is crisp, clean, and efficient. Sweating profusely in the pressing heat, the visitors smile at the youngest children, who hold up their Rainbow Family Coloring Books, point with fat fingers to the poorly colored pictures of our united family. The visitors nod beneath ill-fitting straw hats at the bees we keep and the coffee we grow in the fields that we've sown behind the cottages that we've built. We boys smile back, our mouths plastic, trying not to reveal our hidden pains of body and mind.

Still, there's something in it for us, too. *Visitors* means we get to eat porkchops. For the first time in months, we get to bite into something that once could have bit us back; we get to feel animal juices greasyslick on our tongues. We do not have to go in the box. *Visitors* means the place called Jonestown becomes what we meant for it to become. When our work is done, we look around at each other, squint, try to imagine the way the

meetings and the pavilion and the encampment might look through the wrong end of a telescope, searching for its beauty.

Every Monday morning we bring our dirty clothes to the laundry. We bring some version of the same thing every time: two pants, two shirts, four pairs of socks, four pairs of underwear. We should bring our sheets, but we often don't. We dump our loads out at the entrance to the laundry and leave our nametagged bags beside it. It's becoming harder to tell our clothes apart. Everything we wear is sunbleached, washed out, having taken on the colors of the dirt and foliage and earth around us. It's also nearly all too big. Each boy has his eye on someone smaller than him. As we shrink in hunger and in fear, we plan, search around to see into whose clothes we can fit next.

If we bring our laundry on the wrong day, the laundry workers will not clean it. If we don't bring our laundry by eight-thirty AM, the laundry workers will not clean it. If we bring any more clothes than those we are allotted, the laundry workers will not clean them; they will wash only the two pants two shirts eight socks and four underwear and dump them on top of the extra dirties. If we do not pick up our wet wash within twenty-four hours of dropping our dirty clothes off, the laundry workers will send it to the warehouse. We do not know what happens to clothes they send to the warehouse.

Flies and other insects like the smell of the dirty clothes and they hover around the piles, coming to rest on the most rank parts: On stained armpits. At the small of the back. In crotches. Along the bra line. John shoos a pair of iridescent bugs and shakes a pair of dirty linen pants out of his pile of laundry. He walks down the line of wash

buckets toward Doris, who supervises the laundry operations. All down the rows, women stand, kneading wet swaths of fabric in buckets, the sudsy water darkening with each revolution of their working arms.

Please be careful with these, he says. They're getting a hole right here, see? He wiggles his finger through a fraying spot at the kneecap.

Let me see, Doris says.

Doris holds the pants close to her face, examining the stitching, the seams, the fabric. While she makes calculations in her head, John casually leans back on one of the tables, close to Sarah, who is pouring detergent powder into one of the laundry buckets. In one movement, he slides the yellow banana from his father out of his sleeve and into the pocket of her apron.

Sarah has no visible reaction. Talking in the laundry is forbidden, along with going into the folding room, or using the dryer, and we know that. But we have learned how to make deals with each other here without speaking aloud. We also understand: We, the fathers of her son, are helping her, and we are doing it together.

I'll tell whoever washes them to mind the cut, Doris says. Do you have a sewing kit?

I can't sew, John says. He's made his way back in front of her now, as if he'd never walked away.

Sarah's good with her hands. She can take care of it for you. Won't you, Sarah?

At another time, we would have laughed at that, later, alone in our dorm, but not now, not now that things have changed.

Sarah sets down the heavy box of detergent and rummages through her pockets. I think I still have a sewing kit, she says. She takes out a tiny plastic case with a spool of green thread and a few needles inside. We can see the outline of the banana in the apron pocket and we start sweating. We hope we can only see it because we know it's there.

All set, she says. Find me when the pants are dry, I'll mend them for you.

Thank you, John says.

You're welcome, we think.

Thus we begin to protect her when we can. In the morning, when Sarah dashes off in the middle of breakfast, coughing into the bushes near the playground, we say *She must have brushed her teeth with the dirty water again*. During work, when Sarah goes pale in the bakery, her field of vision shrinking down to pinpoints, sweating all over, and faints, hits her head on the oven handle on the way down, we say *It's just the heat. Take off her top layer, it's what she'd want*. In conversation, she can go from laughter to tears to anger in five minutes. She will storm off. We smile; we try to ease the tension of the moment. *You know girls*, we shrug.

Because they don't believe in pampering pregnant women here—or even entertaining the idea that one could get pregnant here—we work for her if we have to. If Sarah is sick, one of us will cover her bakery shift, or we'll find a girl who can. If Sarah can't get up to get her food, we'll bring it to her. When the grass gets so tall you can't see someone hiding in it, we let her sleep there, cutting around the outline of her body until we get too close and have to wake her up.

WHITE NIGHT

The sound of madness comes from everywhere at once. It has no crescendo (the butt of a rifle pounds into the door frame, tears through the screen in the storm door, lets a black cloud of bugs drone into the dormitory); it gives way to nothing (children's screams share a frequency with blaring sirens); it has no beginning and no end (Jones calls out over the loudspeaker, the same calm words on a loop: *White night, white night. They're here. It is time. Come to the pavilion, my children. It is time to lay down your life*). The sound of madness is a fermata, its conductor waiting, extending his baton high in the tips of two fingers, commanding the players to *hold, steady, keep holding*, as their lungs squeeze into fists, their faces turn purple, their eyes blink black lights born from lack of air.

The sound of madness yanks Charlie out of bed. It wrestles a shirt over his head, shoves him out the front door of his dormitory, trips up his shaking feet and knocks him down in the dirt, where he lies prone as though in worship, his hands pointing toward the pavilion. The crowd swarms, rushing and swelling toward the structure. The first wave of people roaring above him shakes the earth with its running and Charlie holds onto whatever he can—a rock, which rolls loose; someone's pant leg, very briefly; a weed, tugged loose from the soil. He grits his teeth against the pain of his elbows getting mashed into the dirt by feet crashing around him. He knows if he can outlast this first wave of people, spooked like wild horses, he can get up and walk to the pavilion with the

second, slower wave, the people who don't feel the need to show their devotion in such excess. He waits, letting himself get lost in the sound of the sirens, which he imagines getting drawn out from the loudspeakers posted around the settlement. He imagines them undulating in sync with the rise and fall of the wailing alarms. He lets himself appreciate that synchronicity until he wonders how long he's been lying there and why the crowd hasn't slowed and what's that new sound—gunfire—*ratatatatatatating* from the trees, and he squeals in a way that surprises him, covers his head with his hands.

As the intensity of the world outside of Charlie builds, he has to fight to stop the sounds inside him from going quiet. A twelve-hour shift mending cottage roofs in the sun has wasted him, and four restless hours of sleep wedged between three other miserable teenage boys has not been enough to repay the sleep debt he has accumulated since arriving to Jonestown eight months ago. *This is as good a place as any other to sleep*, he thinks, his mind impossibly ignorant of the hot fear flowing in and out of his heart. His muscles make a weak effort to stand and run. He slumps back down. *This could be a good place to let it end*. There on the ground, dirt in his teeth and his heart thudding in his throat, Charlie finds he has no energy to resist death. Nor, he realizes with a thrum through his chest like the pluck of a double bass, does he have the energy to die.

Just as he submits, his conscience, speaking to him in his mother's voice (tough, but not unkind; loud, but not aggressive; silent these last three years after a machinery accident in '75, during the building phases of the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project in Guyana), wakes him up. *Get up*, she says. *You're used to this by now. This isn't supposed to scare you anymore. Are you going to let it end here, in the dirt, like a worm?* She's

right; it's true that Charlie has withstood White Nights before—been woken in the night; alerted to the presence, more or less corporeal, of some outside threat (fascists, the Guyanese government, the US government, the CIA, their angry families) on the security of Peoples Temple; forced to trudge to the pavilion; given a testimony to the extent of his faith in the community and his willingness to die in the name of its socialist goals, and gone back to bed—but this time feels different. The air has an electric intensity, like the skies sit on the verge of storming. Charlie sits up, shakes his head; it doesn't just *feel* different, he thinks; it *is* different. The tenor of the community has changed. This time, guys his age are walking around slinging guns. This time, the searchlights are panning the perimeter. This time, mothers are clutching their children, not even pretending not to cry into their fine, soft hair. Charlie's stomach falls and he knows that, this time, neither they nor anyone else will be spared.

Refusing to die when Jones demands it is a non-option, Charlie knows. He has seen people here—friends, mothers, brothers, strangers—lose the last parts of their identities and become *examples*, examples for what you should not do when faced with the apparent reality of your revolutionary suicide. For the consequence of clinging to life seemed to be a fate worse than dying, a fate spent drugged, a fate spent deep inside the isolation box, a fate spent smaller than the bugs their boots smashed into the soil that refused to grow their crops, that refused to bear their fruit, that had rejected them. He sees himself lying inside the box, getting shouted at by somebody on planning commission all day and night, his back stinging with splinters, his bladder nearly full to bursting. He sees Freddie, John, and George, his last friends in Jonestown, tangled in webs of IV drips,

prisoners in their own bodies. He imagines never seeing any of them again, the promise they had made to make the world better silenced by drugs and, ironically, their will to survive.

And with that, the memory of a strawberry blonde girl, and a bright red skirt, and another promise surfaces, and Charlie stands on shaking legs. To the sound of *Quickly, quickly, hurry to the pavilion now, children, for safety*, Charlie walks with his hands thrust before him away from the pavilion, a salmon swimming upstream.

As Sarah runs toward the tree line, she understands how everything in her life in the Peoples Temple has pointed toward this moment: The midnight lectures in the pavilion. The propaganda films. The classes on socialism and revolutionary suicide she sat through after the workday ended. The broadcasts of those lectures playing over the loudspeaker when they went to bed, which were still playing when they woke up too early in the morning. Not to mention the letters they've written, the blank checks they'd signed, the sworn statements they'd recorded and someone on the staff had filed away in the office. All of it has been a kind of preparation, so that when you're asked to walk away from the sound of your enemies' gunfire in the trees and toward the method of your death (poison, if the tests before were any clue), you can kill the children and the elderly first and you can do it with a kind of calm, a kind of resignation, some sort of *je ne sais quoi* that reminds Sarah of Jesus—although she can never tell anyone here that, since they have long ago traded Jesus for their new Father, Jim Jones.

Sarah remembers the things she's written (*I would willingly lay down my life to save myself from them*). Everything in her training has taught her to walk directly into the face of death, unafraid, prepared to die in the name of socialism. It's better to die on

one's own terms than at *their* hands, she has been told. And Sarah tries to do this now, but now, with the kicking in her abdomen coming in time to her footfalls, each one a kind of silent protest, she isn't so sure who *they* are anymore, from which *they* is her death meant to protect her.

Sarah knows if she were in this position five months ago, she might have acted differently, but now, more than halfway through her pregnancy, she finally feels like she has gotten over some kind of hump, that, finally, this whole secret business about carrying a child and bringing a new life into the world is, despite everyone's protests, beginning to pay off. Recently, she has begun to listen to her Father: She has channeled her excess energy away from sex and into work—*her* work, specifically, the work of a nesting mother. She has reorganized the spices in the kitchen three times: first by name (from A to Z), then by color (from black to red to blue to white), and finally by use (from breakfast to dinner). Old blankets have never been scrubbed so fiercely, hung so neatly, folded so crisply. She has dumped the contents of her footlocker out each night and put things back where they belong. Sarah knows that she has no explanation for these preparations, no counterargument to refute the futility of setting up a place for something that will not be welcome. And now, she has no idea if things will even go that far. If she only turns around, walks back, faces this different, this futile, this final White Night, she could stop lying, could avoid telling anyone she is pregnant, and take her secret to her grave. She breathes hard. Her legs ache. The kicking inside her does not stop. Yes, she thinks, still capable of sarcasm even when the end of life is drawing near. She should just avoid her fears by dying. That's exactly what she wants to do.

Gunfire bursts from the trees in front of her and she slows despite herself, her heels digging into the dirt. The loud noises startle the baby and Sarah holds both hands to her stomach. Sarah knows that startling because of loud noises is one of the most simple and primitive reflexes a human, even one as small as the one floating inside her, has, but the fact that her baby has enough of something human in it to feel fear is more than enough for her to know she has made the right decision in keeping it, in running away with it, despite all of the suggestions, both implied and overt, otherwise.

Sarah allows herself one last look back at the community before she turns her back on it forever. The playground swings hang quiet and still without their riders. The lights in the radio room hum low, as if they are hiding coded messages, protecting secrets. The people, one unit in body and in mind, are herded like sheep toward the end. And, last, a girl, no more than five years old, dark-skinned with untamed hair, sits far, far away from Sarah in the grass. The crowd parts and flows around her, with the care that streams take to notice the stones they pass on their way to larger waterways. Sarah feels balanced on the precipice, a fraction away in either direction from falling back into safety or tipping forward into the uncertain potential of death. The child inside her flips, rolls forward, pushes a hand into her ribcage. Sarah's breaths feel labored as she turns her back on the safety of the trees, hurries away to the girl, takes her hand, pulls her up, and carries her on toward the pavilion's lights.

Charlie doesn't find Sarah in her dormitory. He borrows a flashlight from a guard, who waits at the door for him to finish looking for his glasses, the excuse he made to get inside. He ducks to peer under beds, rustles their thin sheets, even flings open some of the

trunks at their feet, hoping he'll find her, or at least find the other boys: Freddie, lying flat on the wooden floor; George, curled under the blankets, holding his breath; John, his limbs folded and neck tucked, eyes closed in the trunk's darkness.

Scanning the room with his flashlight, Charlie can see that he isn't the only one who left things behind in the frenzied exodus. Freddie's brown shoes sit at the foot of his bed. Most of John's clothes still hang from his bedpost. Other things, less necessary, have disappeared. A child's doll, for instance, its yarn hair knotted in a long red braid. The people have few traditional valuables left, so other items have taken their place: A silver coin, its president's face worn off; a blue scarf, hand-sewn; a crayon drawing of an ocean. *Valuable is variable*, Charlie thinks, snatching his glasses from the windowsill behind his headboard. The screen door smacks him on the way out and the guard locks the door behind him. It's interesting, he thinks, the things we'll take with us when we're on our way to die.

The lights coming from the pavilion throw the slower-moving crowd into blackness and make identifying anyone nearly impossible, but Charlie recognizes his friends by shape before anything else: Freddie, then George, then John, their heights descending like a staircase. They walk in a slightly staggered row with a few feet between each of them, close to the back of the mass of migrating people. A second wave must have started, Charlie thinks, but even this wave moves with a kind of quickness prior second-wave travellers didn't have. Charlie jogs up around and just ahead of them. John signals that he sees him by coughing three times. Charlie talks to a point in the air a few feet in front of him.

Have you seen Sarah? Charlie asks.

We haven't seen anyone, John says.

White night! White night! yells a guard.

Charlie turns his head a fraction of an inch to the left.

You have to have seen *some* people, Charlie says.

We haven't seen anyone important, Freddie says.

John, Charlie says.

And it doesn't really matter, adds George.

Jones' voice comes more insistently now: *Hurry, children. Hurry up.*

The voice of the people rises and the pace of the crowd picks up.

We haven't planned for this, Charlie says. We never really thought about what would happen if it were the real thing.

Hurry up now, say the guards.

It's over, Charlie, Freddie says.

There's no point, John says.

Gun shots explode. Jungle birds get spooked, flap up out of the trees and into the air.

I think they're really there this time, George said.

I don't know how I can do this anymore, John said.

Charlie breaks protocol. He turns and walks backward in front of the boys, trying to keep pace with the crowd.

You made a promise, Charlie says. If you didn't make it to yourself, you at least made it to Sarah.

John seems not to hear him. I'm already dying, he says. I do work all day, during which I don't take any breaks, and then I have the privilege of eating, which is barely enough to keep me alive, and then I sit in meetings, or watch films, all trying to stay awake, and then I can't, I just can't anymore.

This isn't what I signed up for, George says.

This isn't what any of us signed up for, Freddie says.

We keep planting things but nothing will grow.

We aren't helping anyone.

I can't stay awake.

This is for the best.

This will be a relief, even.

Stop! Charlie yells. A few people nearby flinch, their necks shrinking into their torsos. Heat lightning snakes through the heavy clouds; gunshots crack again in the trees like thunder. A murmur rises up around them and Charlie feels his face get hot, embarrassed to be the center of attention. He hears the thud of a few pairs of work boots approaching and circles around behind his friends.

Is there a problem? a guard asks.

No, Charlie says, urging the boys forward, separating them from the rest of the group.

I get it, he said. I get that you're tired. I get that you're ready to give up.

Aren't *you*? George asked.

But you made a promise. We all made a promise. And if you didn't make it to Sarah, he says, lowering his voice, think about the baby. It's a *part* of you. Or you're a part of it. One way or another, it's something that belongs to you. It's something that *is* you.

The boys pick up their pace. Charlie feels hot frustration course through his arms and horse-collars each of them in turn.

Listen to me! he says, letting go, embarrassed for lashing out. Don't—don't you have it in you to save yourself?

A beat passes. They fidget. Scratch at the scruff on their necks. Look up at the sky. John touches Charlie's arm, not unkindly, and goes on. George follows.

Freddie is the last to turn away. He goes ten feet, and he looks back, his brow heavy. Look around you, Charlie, he says. What do you think?

(I'm still struggling with how to fill in this space in the middle. I'm struggling to find compelling and logical reasons to bring these characters together before they decide to hide Sarah in the isolation box to prevent her from drinking the poison. I also know I have an issue with the first part of this section being in the present tense and the rest of it being in the past. I haven't figured that out yet, either.)

Sarah had never been inside the isolation box. During the day, she did her best to keep it on the periphery of her senses. She ignored the earth-borne *thumphthumping* that rose up over the scraping of wet and soapy sheets against her metal washboard. She refused to think of what it might feel like to touch its wooden insides when a splinter

burrowed deep into her palm. She only allowed herself a quick *look, look away* whenever a member of p.c., writhing and yelling, disappeared inside it with a heavy *thud*. But the box's daytime presence made itself clear enough that the idea of lying trapped inside the cramped, claustrophobic, splintering space still shook her awake in the night, gasping for breath, her sheets tangled around her legs and someone's arm tossed across her neck. A minute would pass and the terror would wash away, leaving humiliation and shame roiling in the surf. It reminded her of tunnels burrowed beneath mountains, her grandfather's funeral, passageways whose ends you could not see. She sucked in a lungful of thick night air.

I don't know if this is the best way, she said.

What do you mean? Charlie asked.

I'm saying I'm not sure I can do this, she said.

Do you have some other idea? John said.

The treeline loomed behind them, a heavy curtain.

I—couldn't I—there has to be—

She shrugged.

There isn't, Charlie said.

We've thought of everything, Freddie said.

And all you ended up with is this terrible irony, Sarah thought. That I should lie here alive in this coffin and wait for your ghosts to walk past me, kneel in front of me, wish me well, grant me peace. Say goodbye. A hot flush of selfishness rose up her neck and Sarah wished, hopelessly, that she had never told the boys about their child. *What if,*

she asked herself for the millionth time, *What if* she had stayed quiet, disciplined herself, made better plans, escaped on her own....It was too much for her sometimes, to have people with no real idea about how she felt or what she wanted to do deciding how to handle her life and that of the person she carried inside her. The fact that that little person was one of theirs didn't really matter.

Once I get in there, then what? How am I going to know when it's over? she asked.

You have to be quiet, Freddie said.

Sarah felt hotter.

You'll probably hear it end, John said.

I'll know when I don't hear anything, Sarah thought. Her right ear started ringing.

The baby rolled and pushed down on her bladder.

What if I'm in there and I have to go to the bathroom? she asked.

Hold it, Freddie said.

They've told us it won't take that long, Charlie said.

But what if I need to eat?

He said it won't be that long, John said.

What if my back hurts and I can't lie in one position anymore?

You have to stop worrying about it, Freddie said.

I am allowed to worry about it! she yelled. She grabbed a rock the ground and hurled it at Freddie. Her aim was bad and it soared five feet over his head, crashing into

the trees. Don't worry about it, *goddamn* it! I'm the only one left here with anything left to worry about!

She regretted saying it as the words spilled out of her mouth. A cold silence fell over them. Freddie tracked the lights of a plane blinking overhead. John leaned back on his haunches, hung his head, ran his hands through his hair. George turned away toward the trees. Charlie watched Sarah as she moved her hands over her abdomen. The silence pressed on Sarah, urging her to talk, to say something, anything. The baby nudged its heels into some part of her that made her grunt.

I'm sorry, Sarah said. I wasn't thinking.

For the first time, they didn't say *It's okay*, or *We understand*, or *Don't worry about it*. She didn't expect them to.

Sarah sat on the ground with her calves and feet down inside the isolation box. She started scooting herself forward, easing herself down into the isolation box. She felt off-balance because of the extra weight, however minimal, that the baby added to her stomach. Her movements were small, exacting, precise; but the baby still kicked her and she gasped, her left tricep giving out from the shock. She slipped. Her tailbone dropped to the hard wood and sat like a stone. And, as always, when Sarah cried out, the boys came to her. They touched her, held her, spoke softly into her ear, eased her down onto her back, held her small hands. They moved away as she nudged her body right to left, adjusting herself, trying to get comfortable.

Now what? she asked.

Now you wait, John said.

Sarah nodded. That heavy silence crept up on her again, poking at her like the splinters in her shoulders, telling her to fill the void that grew and grew between them. She ignored it. Instead she watched the boys, studied them, held onto each of their ties and habits and hairlines and hearts, held their faces in her sight for the last time. She shut her eyes.

That's it, she said.

She felt Charlie lean in close to her, smelled the earth on his skin.

Sarah, I wanted to tell you—

Don't, she said. She kept her eyes closed. Don't do that.

But—

Finish this up now.

She breathed deep, her eyes still closed, pulling Charlie's scent deep into her lungs, holding it there. The baby floated, still and warm. A beat passed and the darkness flickered and deepened and the lid of the isolation box *banged* closed on top of her.

Sarah kept her eyes shut. She refused to open them, to remember the boys in any way other than the one she held behind her eyes now.

And then the lid *banged* again.

She flushed with anger. *What kind of game are they playing?* she demanded.

The lid *banged* three more times. But a nanosecond's thought—no change in the light, in the wrong direction, just a little too far away—told Sarah it wasn't the lid that was banging above her. It was a different kind of bang: an explosion, one that sounded

like it could have come from inside the jungle, flying down the barrel of a rifle, slamming into her friends' dark chests.

Her eyes flew open. The box lid sat closed on top of her. She pushed against it and it held in place. Charlie hadn't locked it; she had not heard the *clickclick* of its closing, so it was some other kind of weight, a great human weight, that now pressed her into the ground. Sarah allowed herself one scream before sucking the others back down inside her. They tried to wiggle up her throat but she compressed them, forcing them out her nose with each grunt and shove against the heaviness above her. The boys' voices rose up into shouts, unintelligible, their footsteps pounding and pounding on top of the box.

Suddenly their feet were gone. Sarah shoved once more. The weight had disappeared and the lid flew open, releasing her back into the world. Gasping, Sarah wrenched herself up into a seated position. The flashlight dangled on the precipice of the isolation box and she grabbed it, ignited it, shined it into the darkness, the last images she had hoped to have of her boys wavering, going see-through, disappearing in the light.

The figure that had burst from the woods shined his flashlight into Charlie's eyes. He threw his hand up to shield his face just as he and the other boys moved to form a wall between the figure and the isolation box. As the boys stood and listened, the sound of the figure's breathing, and the shape of his stance, and the angry heaving of his shoulders became familiar, and they recognized him.

Tim? George asked.

What the hell is this? Tim said.

He pulled his hand away from his head. In the light of his flashlight, Charlie could see his palm slick with blood. In his other hand he held the rock that Sarah had hurled into the woods.

What do you think you're doing here? he asked.

We're trying to help her, Charlie said.

Help who? Tim asked.

No one spoke. They could hear the frightened sounds of Sarah's breathing in the isolation box below.

Help her from what?

She's scared, John said.

We're worried about her, Freddie said.

So is Dad, said Tim. He's trying to help all of us by doing this. You all need to be back at the pavilion.

He fiddled with his gun.

This is unbelievable, he said. We're supposed to be part of a family! he said. He smashed his foot on top of the isolation box. What makes you so special? he yelled down to Sarah. What makes you so special that you think get to come here by yourself and outlive us all?

Knock it off, Freddie said.

Go away, John said.

The rifle swung up and Tim moved his weight off of the box.

Don't! Sarah screamed from below. She sat up, forcing the lid of the box open and revealing the whole of her dishelved and frightened form.

You all need to go back now, or else I'll finish the job for you.

A ripping pain tore through Sarah and she hunched over, clutching her stomach. Everything seemed to go quiet. The boys hovered over her.

What's wrong with you? Tim asked.

She doesn't feel good, John said.

Does your stomach hurt? Tim asked.

Charlie kept quiet, holding in the truth struggling to tear its way out of his mouth. Sarah whimpered.

It's normal to be nervous, Tim said, with, for the first time, some genuine compassion in his voice. But it's better this way, and—

Sarah moaned, the pain blocking out all other feelings.

Would you stop? Tim said. He scratched a spot on his neck, agitated.

Tim—

Sarah screamed again.

I said, *stop*—

No! Charlie said.

Charlie—

Stop!

She's pregnant, he blurted.

Tim still held the gun ready, prepared to shoot. He stared at Charlie.

We're trying to keep them safe, Charlie continued. Her and the baby.

The gun drooped a few inches.

The baby? Tim said.

That's what *pregnant* means, George said.

Tim didn't retaliate. He swung the gun back up to a ready position.

She can't, Tim said.

I can, Sarah gasped.

Show me, he said.

What? she said.

Show me, he said again. He pointed the barrel of the gun at her stomach.

Sarah huffed. She kneeled in the box and lifted the three shirts concealing her growing stomach. She wiped sweat from her forehead.

Tim lowered the gun.

Who's the father?

We don't know, Charlie said. It could be anyone.

Tim looked down into the dirt. He turned to face the bright lights of the pavilion. He looked into the dirt again. He clicked the safety and swung the gun around behind him.

Look, if you stay in here, you should be able to make it out. Once it's over, get a backpack and fill it with food. It doesn't matter if you don't have a backpack, just take one; no one here is going to need theirs anymore. You'll have to move quickly.

Tim, I—

What did I just say?

Thank you, she said.

Don't thank me yet, he said.

Do you need anything else? Charlie asked.

No.

Wait! Yes!

They opened the box lid, peered down at her.

There's a little girl at the pavilion. Bring her to me.

Together, the five of them walked toward the pavilion.

The little girl came back by herself. Sarah preferred it that way. She didn't know if she could handle seeing the boys again, didn't know if she had it in her to avoid saying goodbye and keep her eyes closed and let them shut her up alive inside this coffin.

When she arrived, the little girl knocked on the box lid. Sarah nudged it open. For a few minutes the little girl sat on the edge of the box and wiped tears out of her eyes. She made little sounds, of relief, of tiredness, of sadness, Sarah could not be sure. She made a space in the box for her. The girl had to lie sideways, her head on Sarah's shoulder, her hand draped across her stomach. When the baby moved, she gasped. Sarah held her tighter.

You're going to have a baby? the girl asked.

She's going to sleep soon, Sarah said.

How do you know? the girl said.

She sleeps when I sleep, Sarah said.

I mean, how do you know it's a girl?

A hunch, I guess.

They lied together in the box. The sirens sounded far away now.

Are you going to sleep? the girl asked.

I'm very tired.

Okay.

Outside, Jones's voice grew smaller.

I'll go to sleep, too, the girl said.

Okay.

The jungle sounds faded in and out, jolting Sarah out of sleep when they disappeared, all at once, like a vacuum. The more and more they fell away, the more Sarah grew comfortable, the less she felt afraid by their absence.

The girl spoke to Sarah during one of the vacuums.

I'll miss you, Miss Sarah, she said.

Hmm?

I said I'll miss you, Miss Sarah.

It's just Sarah. And why are you saying that?

Because we're going to sleep. For the last time. Just like they are.

The girl's finger tapped the wood, pointing in the direction of the pavilion.

No, Sarah said. She shook her head in the darkness. No. It's not like that. It's different. This is just like going to bed at night. Like you always do.

Oh, the girl says, and Sarah thought she could hear the relief in the girl's voice.

Then are they going to wake up, too?

We'll see in the morning.

Sarah held the girl close.

Aren't you tired?

I am very tired, she said. She spoke soft now, like the people outside, already on their way somewhere else.

It took forty-five minutes for everyone to line up, file down, drink the poison, and wait to die. Charlie stood in line with George, John, Freddie, and Tim, the last of the boys. He saw that they hung their heads on the way to the line, with defeat, with tiredness, with a quiet resignation, he couldn't be sure. He held his own up, watched the things around him that he knew he'd never see again: children smiling, holding dolls and blankets; parents holding their hands; parents tipping the little red cups into their children's mouths first, and then into their own. Old people swallowing and sitting down on the grass, eyes closed, saying goodbye to their full lives, waiting for the end. And when the time passed, and, despite the gunshots, the armed guards, the panning searchlights, and the fear in every child's eye, the loyal members of the Peoples Temple did not die—only then did the sweet honeysuckle taste of life, the taste of breathing hard, of swinging from tree branches, of running through an open field, turn sour in their mouths, go rotten with the taste of what they had revealed, and what waited for them in the morning.

THIRD TRIMESTER

At night George closes his eyes and sees his father rocking in the swing on their front porch, his big toe pushing against the smooth boards under his feet, sending his shrinking frame forward and back, forward and back, a metronome ticking slow in the heat of a Georgia morning. He can hear his daddy, too, laughing in that chair far away. What does a man say when he's far from someone he loves, but not across the ocean from him? How many miles away? Sleep is playing tricks on him. *Reckoned you'd be okay in that heat, didn't you, boy?*, he hears his father say. *Thought a life beneath the Southern sun would make the old girl friendly to you when you travelled south? I did, Daddy*, George thinks, the jungle noises outside going quiet, *and I sure am sorry about that*.

In the morning we wake to the sound of a rooster crowing in the distance. Our bedmates have learned to stir at the sound, have used it as their cue to taking in their first slow inhalations of the morning. We mill in and out of the bathroom. With our eyes still closed, we stand in shower stalls, facing into the stream of water that trickles into our faces. We feel our first stubbles on our chins. We feel ourselves aging. We run bars of soap over our chests and hold our hands over our hearts, feeling the strength of their ticking. *Tired*, we think, *but still there*.

George has a folded sheet of paper that diagrams a series of stretches meant to alleviate the pain in his back. Most of the time he falls asleep before he can do them, but we almost always wake him up and remind him about it. It helps us all if he does the stretches, because if he doesn't, he's difficult to work with during the day. In the middle of feeding the chickens, he'll have to fling his legs out straight in front of him and twist his back. He'll have to leave lunch early to hang from the monkey bars on the playground, waiting for the pressure in his spine to release. While we're all trying to lift boards and hammer them to create a frame for a new shed or outbuilding, he'll have to drop whatever he's holding, leave our legs to buckle and brace as we redistribute the abandoned weight, slump down into the dirt. We'll have to hold the board; we'll have to stop and watch, like George, all anticipating some kind of *pop*, some explosion of pressure that'll work the kink out of his back, return him to our machine, and help us all move on again. *Lift with your legs*, we remind him. *Reach out to your toes. Keep your shoulders on the floor when you twist. Reach longer. Reach higher.*

One morning we're all feeding the chickens. They're clucking and *bawkbawking* around our feet, which would be cute if we weren't so exhausted. We fill our palms with feed and wait, eyes closed, asleep on our feet. George is good with the animals. They let him get close to them when they run away from the rest of us. This morning, though, George stops cradling the chicken he's reached down to pick up and stays still, his spine curved like a fishing rod. The chicken squawks and *flapflapflaps* up out of his hands. George stands half bent over; the sweat on his nose drips down his nose and evaporates in the dirt. He lets himself fall down into it.

What happened? we ask.

Are you gonna get up? we ask.

I don't think I can get up, he says.

What do you mean you can't get up? Charlie asks.

George keeps his lower body still. He grabs a two-by-four left over from the new coop we're in the middle of building and thwacks Charlie across the shins with it. Charlie rolls in the dirt, moaning and clutching his shins.

Are you gonna get up? George asks.

I'll go get someone, John says. He jogs off toward the encampment.

What does it feel like? we ask George.

George grunts. You know that feeling when you play Operation?

When you touch the sides? we say.

He grunts in response.

Charlie goes back to feeding the chickens. They run away from him. He chases after them in vain for a few minutes before stopping and returning to George.

Later we make George go see the doctor about his back. He still can't stand up straight, so we let him lean on us as we walk to the office together. While he's inside, we sit on the stoop and wait, drawing our names in the dirt, hoping no one will come by and ask us why we're sitting still, why our eyes are closed, if we're even listening to them because we aren't.

How do you feel when you stand up straight and look down at your feet? the doctor asks.

Electricity rockets through his spine.

Not good, George says.

Would you describe the pain as *chronic*? the doctor asks.

What does *chronic* pain mean? George asks.

The doctor stops writing. He cocks his head a little like he does when he thinks you've said something stupid.

It's a kind of pain that's lasted for a long time but doesn't go away, he says.

Aren't I too young to have chronic pain? George says.

The doctor doesn't speak. His silence speaks for itself.

Early in her sixth month, Sarah breaks our code of silence. One morning after breakfast Freddie is leaving the dining tent when she sprints across the playground to cross his path. Children dodge out of her way, dip around the whipping towel swinging in her left hand. When she gets close to Freddie, he sees her eyes flashing, too alert, febrile.

Are you feeling okay? he asks.

You were asking around for some playing cards? she says.

I didn't, he starts to say, but she cuts him off.

I found a deck in my dorm. Here.

Freddie cups the deck of cards in his hand like it could break if he drops it, like it's a baby bird, brokenwinged. I don't—

Don't forget to take out the jokers, she says, her bag of toiletries swinging as she walks away toward the showers. In most games you don't need the jokers.

He watches her go. We always do.

The day passes like all the rest. That night in the dorm, with most of us and the other housemates falling asleep after dinner, a handful of rice as satisfying and dense as a stone in our stomachs, Freddie goes to lie down on his bed and he feels the deck of cards in his back pocket, pressing into his upper thigh. He sits up, takes the cards out, decides to play solitaire on his cot. The finish on the cards is so smooth, he longs to rub them on his bottom lip, to feel some soft comfort against his face. He studies their reverse, a tessellation of white and black gladiators seated straightbacked on longlegged horses. Freddie shuffles the cards, flips through them, counts them out between his flicking thumb and forefinger; and there, in the dying light coming in through the window, he reads the note, scrawled in faint pencil along the edges of the jokers' red-and-yellow fool's caps: *Thank you all for your help. The food helps but I'm getting bigger and soon my clothes aren't going to fit. What am I to do? Please help me I don't know and I'm scared.*

The next morning, Freddie passes the deck to Charlie, who later passes it to John, who, unexpectedly, hands it off to Tim, who slides it to George under the dinner table, and then we've all seen it; we've each played the game, read the note, racked our brains, tried alone, impatient, to solve this problem.

Because we follow the rules, we pick up our wet wash on Tuesday morning before eight-thirty AM. The laundry free of flies now, we filter around the bags of clean clothes, looking for the tags with our name on them. A group of women come by to drop their

dirty things off while we're hunting for our loads. It's the women in Sarah's dorm; Tuesday must be their drop-off day. Sarah slings her pile of dirty clothes onto the ground. We all try not to notice each other; we look at anything we can except each other's faces.

One of the women with Sarah is big. Or, she used to be big. Jungle living has not agreed with her. She has the look of a person who's lost too much weight in too little time. Her clothes fit poorly, and folds of skin hang loose around her belly and her chin. We watch her instead of looking at each other, and then the idea moves through us at once, like when, in our old high schools, our teachers would say *hold hands* and then send the charge of a van de Graaf generator up down into and through our nervous arms. George slams his shoulder into John, who loses his balance. He wheels his arms around, but it doesn't stop him from tipping over, crashing into the laundry girl sloshing clothes in a bucket behind him. She squeals, and together falls with Tim and the bucket, over and off the table.

Come *on*, George! the girl cries.

All the women abandon their washing and go to help clean up the mess. They swarm around the pile, pulling apart swaths of wet fabric, fussing, scolding each other: *Wait until it's dry before you try to get the dirt off*, they say, swatting at each other's wrinkled fingers. As it's happening, Freddie sticks his hand into the big woman's pile of clothes, pulls out a white t-shirt, and shoves it in with the shirts in Sarah's small pile. We form a wall in front of him. We edge around and move slightly, leaning in, beginning sentences, like we're trying to help.

Doris, her arms full of wet sheets, huffs, indignant and angry.

You're such a problem, you know that? Always trying to get someone to laugh at you. Like you're more important than this.

She spits on George's shoes.

You're going to go in the box for this, you know! I'm going to have to say something about it at the meeting! It's my responsibility.

If supervisors had evaluations, we know what Doris' would say: *Good worker, obedient, doesn't take breaks. Ready to rat on anyone for misbehaving.* But George is already walking away, his laundry bag slung over his back, the time in the box worth it, the switch concealed.

The next night, at the meeting, we expect Doris to make good on her promise. But we are teenage boys. We make mistakes. Sometimes we make them on purpose and sometimes we don't. We should have known something would go wrong first.

The meeting starts like they normally do. The thousand of us gathered there listen to the heads of different organizations give report on their teams, report anything new or unusual happening with Temple members they have been instructed to keep an eye on. Just as we start patting our pockets for pencils to stab into our palms to help us stay awake, the big woman stands.

I went to pick up my wet wash yesterday, she says. Tuesday's my designated day to drop it off so I went to pick it up Wednesday morning—today—so I didn't get in any trouble. I picked it up on time and said hello to Doris, she saw me there, didn't you, Doris? Right. So I took my things back to my apartment and went to the line to hang up

my clothes. And when I started hanging it looked like some of my clothes musta gone missing in the wash.

The crowd hums. They're bored, but our stomachs flip and flip. We messed up. We are idiots. We did something wrong.

Who was working? Dad asks. Who, who was supposed to—someone was supposed to keep all your things together and they didn't. Someone made a mistake. Who—Doris, who was working this morning?

No, the lady says, it ain't Doris's fault, or any other laundry worker's.

How do you know? another woman asks.

Because I saw a girl wearing my shirt. A too big shirt hanging like hell a little girl, she says.

The crowd looks down at the rows of children, trying to see if any of them are wearing oversized clothing. They look at each other, confused, in their own clothes.

A woman stands up.

I took all the children's clothes to the laundry on Monday, Dad, I didn't mix anything up.

I know you didn't, honey, the big woman says, because I see her wearing it now.

She points at Sarah.

You can check the hem, she says. I sew my name on the hem of all my clothes in case get mixed up with everyone else's.

And Sarah, bless her heart, turns the hem up, and there it is, in blue stitching: tiny initials that are not her own.

The crowd roars. Dad walks and gets close to Sarah's face, leans down to meet her while staying just slightly above: a subtle indication of his power.

Do you have anything—is there anything you can say to explain this? Dad asks.

The crowd starts getting louder. Someone nods to Dad and runs off in the direction of the kitchen.

We know what needs to happen. Freddie nods, almost imperceptibly, speaking for all of us, letting her do it. Sarah stands.

It wasn't me, Sarah says. It was *them*. She says the *them* so hard it's like she believes what she's saying, like she really is angry at us for helping her, and our hearts turn soursad, just for a moment. She goes on. They knocked over a bucket and mixed up the clothes on purpose, just to get a rise out of Doris.

Doris stands up. She's *right*, she says. George *did* knock another boy into the buckets on purpose.

And that—that's all anyone needed to get the crowd going, just that one piece of corroborative evidence, and we are done, it is over for us, and we stand with dignity to take our fate like men, like fathers, like the fathers we are.

Like when we ran into the jungle to scare the little boy, we don't think about it—we stand up, walk to the front of the congregation, accept what's about to happen to us. We let them say what they're going to say to us: that we're sinners, that we're disobedient, that we wouldn't be here without Father, that only he can save us, that we sow discontent, that theft from one is theft from all. Like they're not human. *We should*

kill you, they say, and after a while, it feels like maybe they should, like maybe they're right.

The man who ran off has come back. He's wearing gloves, the kind you use when you garden. In his cupped hands he holds a mound of thin red peppers. We fidget. Each person standing behinds us reaches around and clamps their thumb and forefinger on our noses. Some of us, those who don't realize what's about to happen, open our mouths right away, let our jaws hang slack like apes. Others hold out as long as they can, going red before their lungs betray them and pop their mouths open, greedy to suck humid air down into their depths.

Stop! the big woman yells.

What is it, dear? Dad says.

You forgot *her*, she says, pointing at Sarah. She's *wearing* the shirt, ain't she?

No, we think, no no no no no no no no no.

Ain't like she was too *upset* about *her* laundry missing if she's *wearing* what got given to her, the woman says.

Pull her into the line! someone screams, and Muggs the monkey in his metal cage screams back. Our *no no no no nos* are all we hear.

The man with the peppers starts with John at the front of the line. Careful as a priest with the Eucharist, he brings his fingers just outside John's mouth and sets the pepper on his tongue. The man who once held John's nose now holds his mouth closed. He massages John's throat to stimulate swallowing. We shift, turn our heads to look down the line, gaping at each other. Tim is pulling against the man who has his arms held

behind his back. Freddie is kneeling straight-backed, in contrast to his open mouth. Sarah has crumpled down in on herself, the huge white shirt too big on her, making her look like a doll in an oversized dress. She is not fighting.

One by one, with the sounds of the cheering crowd as his motivation, the pepper man gives us our due. Mouth opens, pepper goes in, mouth clamps closed. Even if we don't chew, the saliva in our mouths works on the pepper's smooth flesh, and we begin to feel it, the heat in our mouths growing in intensity to match the heat outside of it. Somewhere we remember someone telling us it's good to eat hot food in hot places, so your body maintains equilibrium with the outside, but that doesn't matter now when our eyes are streaming, when heat is firing through our noses and our sinuses.

We cry out behind closed lips. We drool down the fronts of our shirts. Our shoes slip on the concrete and we stumble to the ground. Everyone is shouting, screaming, *no no no noing*, and suddenly I can think of no one but myself, only my own pain, my own head cleaving, my own throat barbed and dried and scorched. A sheen of tears blurs the room; the man behind me forces my head down and the floorboards ripple under my feet. I want air, I want milk, I want my mother.

Beside me I hear Sarah hit the concrete. She is bent over, clutching her stomach, crying, but not in the way I am crying; she cries in the way an animal in the jungle cries. They've pulled the stolen shirt off of her, and we can see everything. Her breasts have swollen since the last time I was with her, which could be innocent enough, but her belly—her belly is puffing out, round and hard, with life in its early stages swirling around inside of it.

For a moment I consider staying quiet, consider just drooling out all over the floor, waiting for the heat to leave me. I wonder if her stomach, even in its nakedness, is like the banana John slipped into her apron that day in the laundry: if only someone who knows its there can see it for what it is. But I can't help it. I swallow the half-chewed pepper in my mouth and twist my neck, breaking the grip of the person behind me.

Stop, I cry, She's pregnant.

The thumping stops but the screams of my friends do not.

Please, please stop, she's pregnant, she's a mother.

The crowd goes through a number of reactions.

What is this?

Who is the father?

You don't *know*?

How could you? they scream.

You let sex distract you from the cause!

You couldn't help yourself! I know you couldn't.

It wasn't, I say. I mean, I don't know, I stumble.

They roar even louder at that, and I realize it doesn't matter if it was me or if it wasn't me, I'm the one taking the hit for this, and let it be that way, let me be the martyr who takes it for the boys, for Sarah, like she once took it for me, though I want to believe we took it for each other.

Their death grips are like meat hooks locking into me in the tender place beneath my shoulder blades. They drag me off the pavilion, away from the crowd. The last thing I

hear is someone yelling for the doctor. The last thing I see is a smear of blood on the hem of the white shirt, discarded on the ground. I close my eyes and let myself go. I know where I am going. There are no visitors here now, and they have nothing to hide.

On my third night in the isolation box, when, for some reason, they've left me alone for a minute, I start hearing voices. The voices repeat my name, letting it fall down on me in the box like clods of dirt. My name thumps against the wooden boards, an inch from my nose, just out of reach. Like me, they have something Midwestern in their vowels, the linguistic influence of a Chicagoan father. I remember a man asleep in his chair, a newspaper fallen down onto his chest, the ash of a still-lit cigarette in his mouth falling down and smoking on the newsprint. I bang my head against the wood, rattling my grey matter, trying to make a connection. I am afraid to talk.

I squint up through the slats. The sun has set hours ago and the jungle is dark. Despite the fact that I can see the sky, feel the temperature go from hot to worse to stifling over the course of the day, my body is out of sync, and I feel awake, alert, bright-eyed like the beasts that wake up when we all go to sleep at night.

I've convinced myself the voices have been coming from my own head until, like waking from a nightmare and feeling your bedsheets, looking at the apple tree outside your window, touching your face to make sure you are really you, I see the shape of a girl whispering down into the ditch, stringy brown hair falling around her thin face. A boy leans over beside her, dirt under his fingernails, I imagine. A girl and a boy with whom I share a father, both in Jonestown and in California. My blood. My brother and sister.

How did you get here? I cry. After three days in here I sound less like them than I thought. We live in different dorms. They separate us by age and responsibility. My siblings have different parents here.

Be quiet, my brother says. He is small but not stupid.

I miss you, I say. I miss you so much.

Be quiet, my brother says again.

We tried to bring you food, my sister says, but we couldn't save anything from dinner.

We were too hungry, my brother says.

It's okay, I say.

None of us talks for a minute. I wonder if someone has heard them, if someone is coming back to chastise them, to send them home, to stand on the box and yell down at me again.

What happened to Sarah?

My brother puts his hand on the box.

She had a baby, my sister says.

Everyone was so surprised, my brother says.

It was born with a caul on its face, my sister says.

They said that means it is a special baby.

For a second, a second too long, they don't say anything.

Well. Would have been, my sister says.

The lump in my throat thickens. Would have been? I say.

They don't say anything.

The doctor said it came too early, my sister says.

That's why it had the caul, says my brother. Like it was under a blanket. Like it hadn't woken up yet.

An emptiness bursts inside my chest. I feel all my air leave me. From somewhere far away, I feel pain, the feel of my teeth smashing the stuff of my tongue between them.

When are *we* going to wake up? I cry.

My brother and sister don't say anything.

We have to go, they say too soon.

Someone is coming, they say.

We miss you, too, they say.

I can't reply. I can only spit the blood out of my mouth and press my palms up above me, hoping to feel the soft flesh of their hands. But they leave me, and all I feel is the dumb wood against my dying skin, and in the few seconds before someone comes back, I realize this is the first time I have been alone since I can remember.

My aloneness grows too great, too powerful, too large to stay inside my head inside my throat inside this box inside the cruel river of rushing time. I choose to paddle upstream. Instead of staying here, I leave with them. I rewind the film of my life: My brother and sister come back; their throats swallow up their words, inflating their tiny lungs; they leave. Someone comes to unlock the lid to the box, pull it open; from flat on my back I leap up and out (the wet mark of a dog's nose eye-level on a sliding glass door), my arms

reachingreaching (finally!) and slipping back down into the grip of my captors. They pull me back across the grass to the pavilion. As I backwards-flail across the ground my body rustles dirt back into its place, brings animals skittering and scampering back toward me, unsmooths flattened grass. The blood blisters on my skin shrink away. I fall into a kneel inside the pavilion. My drool leaps up my chin, my tears slide up my cheeks, a gloved hand pulls a pepper from my mouth.

And then I let the tape play again, like normal. Like the first time, I tell them about Sarah and our baby. But, this time, instead of pulling me away, they hold me; their death grip on my shoulders becomes tender, loving almost, and they stand me up. They run to her to help her and they let me go; they let my friends go, and I am free to run down the path with the rest, to follow Sarah to the doctor's office, to become one with them again.

Charlie kneels down in front of the window and lets us take turns standing on his back to get a look through the window. All the lights are on inside. Dr. Schacht and the nurses crowd Sarah; we can't get a clear, uninterrupted look at her, but we can see her down on all fours, heaving like an animal. She moans in a way that embarrasses us. It's a private sound, we think, one we are only accustomed to hearing when we're alone with her. To hear it all together like this makes our cheeks go pink in the dark, makes our hearts beat faster and our palms sweat.

We see the wet and matted hair at the nape of Sarah's neck, shiny with exertion. We smell iron, the smell of life escaping the body. Her hair, her blood, her eyes, everything is red. We see Sarah on her hands and knees, pulling her clothes off, trying to

get comfortable; we can't think. We wait there until we see the baby crown, its dark hair hidden beneath the shroud it wore to shield itself from the light of this world. In turns, we watch the birth of the baby that is all of ours. Our heads feel like they are on fire. It's on our minds and printed on our coins and in our hearts: out of many, one.

And as much as we wanted to be alone we now want to hold the men around us close like brothers. We pat out hands on the earth and feel for out brothers' fingers, hold them with our whole hands when we find them, like the never-forgotten reflex of a baby, of the baby coming forth to life in front of us. Will it have John's brown hair? Charlie's pigeon-toes? Will its back hurt like George's when it turns sixteen? Will he have Freddie's brains? Tim's obedience? Will it pedal hard and fast, will it run over toads, will it cry into its pillow afterward? Those features, we think, he can't choose. Those are the last decisions that we and Sarah will make for him. Everything else he will choose on his own: what he eats, where he sleeps, with whom he plays, what he studies, whom he loves, where he works, where he lives, how he dies. Our hearts fill with hope for him and those he'll serve—just as we hoped to serve—in his own way.

And then, from somewhere in the night, the generator makes a *hmmmm* sound, a sound of release, and the room goes dark and silent. Much too silent. And as hard as I try, I cannot make the story end differently. I do not know enough about the generator to fix it, cannot explain why if I could only just fix the generator and keep the lights on then the baby can stay alive, can breathe, can come into this jungle roaring and screaming like its mother and the other beasts around it. We are meant to cry as we come into this world. We are meant to come into the light.

BIOGRAPHY

Erin M. McDaniel is a graduate from the M.F.A. program in Creative Writing at George Mason University, where she studied fiction. During her career at Mason, Erin taught Composition and Literature and served as the Managing Editor for *So to Speak: a feminist journal of language and art*. In 2013, Erin received the Shelley A. Marshall Fiction Award; she also received an Outstanding Mentor Teacher Award in 2013 and 2014. Erin is from Baltimore and won't let you forget it. Her next stop is Cleveland, Ohio, with her fiancé, Alex, whom she is marrying this summer.