

# Growth Rings

“Nine bean rows I will have there, and a hive for the honey bee  
And live alone in the bee loud glade.”

-William Butler Yeats, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*

“I want to be a white horse!  
I want to be a white horse on the green mountains!  
A horse that runs over wooden bridges and sleeps  
In abandoned barns...”

-Robert Bly, *Three Presidents*

I think a producer should make a TV show out of our school, with students as characters representing different types of people. There is lizard boy, who folded hands in constrictor knots as he talked about his reptiles stacked in elevator reflective cages. A purple stem probed from the top of his converses. There is bubblegum girl, who talks in burbling pulses and pops brittle pockets of mint gum for emphasis. She can twitch both ears, she shows everyone at lunch. There are the swinging, talking girls, who swing hair over shoulders and loose silver necklaces across dipping shirt collars. Their voices lilt like music when your finger rolls over the volume bar, bursting up with rushed words, fading to quick rustlings when someone walks by. I watch the stream of people from the scooped out corner between two rows of lockers. Flickers of talk bounce between the locker edges. The tiles swap between white and red. I watch the girl with white blonde hair step carefully between the colors.

“Did you catch the trick on the homework?” she says, hair overlapping down her back like a long haired rabbit.

“What do you mean? What trick?” says the boy whose pencil dances in figure eights. His mouth fixes in a worried line.

“He said there was one.”

The metal stall doors swing with creaks. I am inside the first stall, drawing a line of animals in pencil on the wall. I sketch the outline of a red cat, hunting with long legs bent to the ground and a mane like a lion. I hear the noise of the second stall door, the rustling of shoes against the tile. I listen to the metal walls pulse, ease the pencil back inside my backpack. I lean down and see her downy leather shoes slide over the tile. Static tingles against my hands as I open the door. The bathroom is the best place to have perfect conversations.

A few seconds later, a girl with a flowing scoop necked shirt, curls wound tight as a chain link fence. “Hi,” she says, and we move to the lines of sinks, the mirrors with doodled scratches. “Hi,” I say, “I like your shirt.” I collect perfect conversations, the kind of conversations which grow like fragile eggs. I know all the questions to ask.

“Thanks,” she smiles, leaning towards the paper towel dispenser. She touches my head with smiling brown green eyes. Streams of water flow down my hands like paint. “I like your skirt.” My green skirt swings around my feet. “You’re in Mrs Ratchet’s class, right?”

“Yes. Are you in Mrs Lupin’s class?” I am wiping all the moisture off my hands, letting the water spread stripes on the dry paper towel.

“Yes.”

“I’ll see you around,” The paper towel makes a perfect arc, landing on top of the pile in the wastebasket. I know the right moment to walk away.

“See you,” she smiles at my back. I swing open the door heavy across my body, and my feet replace each other on the tiles.

Today is my first session with Abigail, the high schooler who tutors math. I walk into the learning room, posters flapping against the wall, stacks of straw yellow tables. “Hi,” I say, taking long strides across the carpet. Abigail sprawls across a plastic chair, smiling like a sleepy cat.

“Hi, Kyra. How are you?” She sorts through the last math assignment, laying out the sheets of homework. The buzz of other students leaks through the door. She points out problems with sleek black painted nails, whittles strings of equations to a single number. We dash boxes around the answers, slit the paper with pencil claws.

We finish the homework ten minutes early. “What kind of music do you like?” The only music I know is old, the indie rock my mom listens to on weekends. I sprint across upstairs halls when my mom turns up the stereo. My mom says, “You’ll slip, don’t run,” but I glide in tie dye

socks and never fall. “Do you like this?” Sharp beats fill the room, a man’s voice rasps underneath. “Don’t ask me, wolf at the door, don’t ask me,” he whispers, not quite singing.

I nod to the beat, the guitar making slow loops. I draw three dark straight lines, leave a space until the guitar takes over. The guitar is wavy, looping lines. Abigail leans over, watching me draw the sudden pulses of beat, the thin, squiggly lines of vocals.

“Are you drawing the song?”

“Yeah. These are the beats, this is the guitar.” The rhythms drop like knives from the ceiling and I catch them.

“I see that. Thick, sharp lines for the backbeat, and the guitar makes little peaks.” Abigail is drawing now, too.

“A lot of the older kids like this. A lot of the other high schoolers.” She draws a spiral, shading the edges. “We used to play this song constantly, over and over. Once we drove an hour and kept the music on a constant loop.” On album covers, singers take off alone through deserts the color of sunsets. I imagine the sharp lines of an old car, smudging against long stretches of sand. Abigail sits in the front seat, unspooling a song like scenery.

“Have you showed this to your art teacher? This is a great new kind of art, I bet your teacher would be really impressed. Maybe someday you’ll be in a museum,” she says. And she’s right, we will be new cartographers, new scientists scanning vast landscapes of songs. We’ll fill rooms with curling papers, sketch out songs with quick brushstrokes. There will be a museum exhibit, there will be endless scrolls of mapped beats streamed across the walls of galleries. There will be old rock music, rising in scraggly, churning sound mountains, colors lurching from red to blue to green. There will be smooth leaping waves of R&B. These beats will hang alone on a gallery wall, centered in a thin black frame, sharp as your nails.

Samantha asked me once if I liked Ryan Cedar. I only saw Ryan Cedar on the margin of view screens and plastered on supermarket magazines. Posing with slicked back hair under the “Popular Music Now” section of my mom’s stem. When I said “Yes,” her mouth folded like construction paper. She turned to her friend, Madison, the girl with the thin silver necklace, whispering “Kyra likes Ryan Cedar!” They laughed, hair bouncing, words repeated like a surprised chorus. “Really? Kyra? Do you think he’s cute?” Laughter jolted along like static. I slipped through the hallway, skimming the red and white tiles. Most talking is just white noise.

I watch her stiff nails separate stacks of homework. Her eyes are little cat slits as she slides papers from the homework pile. She uses a green pen, rolling across papers in bursts of checks and exes. I get my homework back with smiling faces, two pricks for eyes and a sharp mouth slit. I make my fours closed at the tops like arrowheads and my sevens dripping like icicles.

When I move to sit next to her desk, she smiles. My test is multiple choice, history, my best subject. My pen cuts the shapes of letters, knife pointed As and swooping Bs. I draw her as a cat on the margin, slivers of ink for claws. She smiles a thin crescent smile, pen slashing open a history test.

“Let’s put all your tests out on the ground,” Abigail says, and we do, slotting the papers out of my purple binder and laying them onto the floor. We tile the ground with tests, and it looks good, squares lined up and stretched out like fields from the air. Abigail slots the last test against the wall, covering the floor with a new white carpet.

“We’re going through these, OK? For every problem you missed, we’ll do it together until you can do it on your own.” The grades flash like alien signals, burning crop circles watched from planes. We start with a B test; she talks quickly, fingers darting out to fill gaps between words. Her pencil taps the paper, writes out equations, slashes out multiples. She makes room for my pencil. “What next?” We cross multiply and expand denominators. I think of math as business, sometimes, factory construction. My hand moves to gather up numbers and cart them from place to place, Abigail piling decimals out of the side of a truck. “You’ve got this,” she says, face beaming, moon colored nails grabbing at light. “Keep going. We’ll wipe these Cs off the face of the planet!”

I combine my test grades into words. With the C I can spell cab; with C+, act and if I could rearrange letters cat. If I had a k, I could spell back and with an I and my one D I can spell acid. I hover above my tests, catching all the letters in the same frame. “I don’t want to wipe the C’s off the face of the planet,” I say.

“I’ll show you something,” she says. “Once upon a time, a teacher punished a fourth grader for disobedience. The teacher told the boy to stay after school until he’d added up all the numbers from one to one hundred.”

She lines up all the numbers from one to ten, first forward, then backward. Her pencil scratches like a whispering voice. She added up the letters in each column.

$$1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 + 9 + 10$$

$$\underline{10 + 9 + 8 + 7 + 6 + 5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1}$$

$$11+11+11+11+11+ 11+11+ 11 +11 +11$$

“ $11 \times 10$ ,” she wrote, “ $11 \times 10 / 2$ .” “Adding the numbers from one to ten twice is just eleven times ten. Adding the numbers from one to ten is just eleven times ten divided by two. Adding the numbers from one to one hundred is just one hundred and one times one hundred divided by two. He figured out the answer to the teacher’s problem in less than a minute. The teacher thought he cheated, or that he was a genius. But he just had a trick.” Abigail’s nails click rhythms on the table. I can see the mathematician, a nine year old in a dirty black T-shirt and hair springing in messy curls, pencil’s raspy voice mouthing secrets to a blank sheet of paper.

“Getting As gives you a store of tricks. When you’re in trouble, you’ll have some reserves to pull from.” We spend the last fifteen minutes expanding fractions. Before I leave, we slide tests off the floor, slot them into the pocket of my purple binder. “See you next week,” she walks away fast, feet sending rhythms through the hallway. An old song taps its rhythms in my head. Secret equations tug at the back of my throat.

William is a third grader, two years younger than me, who I call overalls boy. His overalls fall in a gray blue sheet of corduroy, buckles flapping against the felt. Abigail tutors him before me, and she has a scrabble board out now, letters dumped over the plastic table.

“Come on. Let’s play,” Between her hands, lines of tiles form and lengthen, squares taken and replaced one by one. Tiles rearrange like houses flashing by the car window. “I see ‘cat,’ do you see ‘cat’? I see ‘tree,’ do you see ‘tree’?” But William just sits in the plastic chair. His feet swing against the carpet like hammers.

His eyelids hang loose, eyes drifting to the window. Her hands pick apart the seven letters lying flat in front of William. “What can you make? Come on, look at this, you have a c. A r. An e, two is, a t, an s. Four consonants, three vowels.” William watches as she lays the tiles flat, like a screensaver set in slow motion. CAT, RAT, TAR, CRATE. “This is a long one. What’s this one?”

“That’s crate. I could do it if I wanted to,” William flaps an overall buckle.

“What do you see? Can you make a bigger one? Make a harder one,” Abigail’s fingers move to flip more tiles, carefully arranging.

“I could do it,” William scrapes the buckle with a bitten down finger. Abigail pushes an “r” toward him. His legs flap like fish. “I could do it if I wanted. I could do it, but it’s boring.” Her fingers work the seams of letters, pushing an “r” against “CRATE.” I walk over and lean in next to him. I want to drag his fisted hands across the table, unfold his fingers one by one.

“You can do it,” I lean towards him across the table. “If you can do it, do it.” I arrange letters against his hands. “That’s crater, see? I’ve got it all lined up for you.” He kicks the chair back with wide swings.

“You aren’t my teacher,” he stands up and steps away. “You’re just that weird fifth grader who plays by herself.”

“I’m just lining them up for you. They’re ready for you, I’ve just lined them up.” I rake the letters together in a pile. Abigail watches, hands plucking hair off of her face. A row of tiles says SFGSPA, crowded like a newspaper headline. If I had a newspaper I would frame it over my face and let the headlines spill all over my body. Today the newspaper said, “Lead Members of Cult Freed, Gaining Influence,” and also “Kiribati now 1/3 Immersed in Water” and also “Beagle Found, Saved From Drowning by Caring Neighbors.” My hands push tiles into rows of block letters, pressed to paper by the descending metal print machines. William presses on the table, jolting the letters in strange patterns. Tiles sprawl like windows in a housing complex, shedding a borrowed, curtained glow.

I know where Abigail’s high school friends go, after class. They go behind the parking lot, past the far edge of the playground. On Wednesdays, my mom picks me up late after school, so I watched hunched behind the big plum tree as Abigail’s friends talk.

Abigail crouches on the ground, scrabble board on the pavement in front of her. A boy with a blue T-shirt and a girl with striped blonde hair sit next to her. “Did you know that aa is a word for a type of lava? Hawaiians have ten or twenty different words for types of lava.” The tiles dance under her fingers. Her friend is drinking smoke and laughing in quiet breaths. Abigail is flipping leaves which keep getting blown onto the board.

“Come on, want to play?” I see the wormy shapes of letters, squirming across the tile. I think I see an f, an i, a c, an h. Fiction, I think, finches, fishes with silver earring scales. A fisher cat with flashing paws.

“Yeah,” The friend waves a tiny flame in front of her cigarette. “Oh, come on!” There is a sound of metal rubbed together, and a low sigh. “One time Sam and I went to Mr Friedhart’s class high, pupils out to here. He called my parents, and my parents wouldn’t believe it.” Her friend sucks threads of smoke and sweeps her hair over the pavement. The bark of the plum tree presses the bones on my spine. I think my back will bend if I sit like this long enough. The tree trunk will indent my back bones like old typewriter keys.

“She said, Katey tells me everything, Katey would never do that, do you have any proof? And the only proof was locked up inside us.” The boy’s hand dives into the friend’s hair, which parts like waves before a storm, like surfacing sea monsters. The smoke flows thick and heavy around them. I wonder how they breath in all that smoke.

“Come on, let’s play. I have 67 points now, you’ve got 56, you’ve got 58.” Her hands scatter and regroup, tiles clicking rhythms on the board. The smoke fuzzes and dulls her face. Looking at them reminds me of watching fish swim in fogged up water.

“How did that test go today?” The friend’s hand snakes up the boy’s t shirt.

“All multiple choice. Oh, great God of multiple choice, I perform the sacred process of elimination in the hopes that thy may grant me your blessed A.” The girl’s laugh jolts against the boy’s t shirt, and Abigail joins in. Her laugh falls like a sharp bark and her face bends low over the Scrabble board. The board is cardboard and gusts of wind keep lifting it so it almost flips over. The girl’s smoke smells different than my mom’s friends cigarettes. My mom’s friends smoke on the porch and the cigarettes hang off their mouths like half eaten carrots.

“You should have gone into Friedhart’s class blasting music,” Abigail says, head lifting from the board. “Just turn your stem full blast, and feel it rattle your eardrums.” The older stems play music by vibrating the inside of eardrums; the new stems manipulate brainwaves directly. Older stems send music banging across your skull. The new ones feel smoother, but I like the bumpy vibrations of the old stems. My mom says in a few years there will be no old stems anymore, and I will have to adjust.

“We wouldn’t be able to hear him if he asked a question,” The friend stares unblinking at Abigail, eyes red like the insides of plums. There is part of a plum crushed into my knee, smooth and pulpy on my skin.

“Who cares if he asks you a question? You’re mom won’t believe him about that, either.” The boy laughs, spilling smoke.

“True enough,” he says. “Then again, your mom wouldn’t give a shit if you went to class high.”

The boy catches the friend’s hand under his t shirt, pressing her fingers over the cloth. “Stupid Friedhart,” says the girl, “His tests really are unfair. They’re just so vague, I feel like I’m always trying to read his mind. I wouldn’t go into class high if his tests weren’t so unfair.” I twist my hand into my shirt, my fingers cold and clutching. It hangs there, swinging in a fabric pocket.

“He’s just boring,” Abigail’s hands pluck determinedly at the tiles. “He’s just boring, and vague.” I can smell the smoke like a musty basement, like dried herbs hanging on hooks in the dark.

“True enough, friend, true enough,” the boy swings one arm around his girlfriend, one around Abigail. His arm hangs across her neck like a wet shirt, her spine strained over the board, spelling cat. Spelling wind, spelling smoke, spelling heavy hanging plums, spelling hidden houses caught in patterns by the window frame.

I go home, and I turn on the hologram. A yellow haired girl sways her arms between both knees and sings into a tiny circular mic. “I won’t come back, baby won’t come back,” she sings in a soft, stacy voice. Fuzzy car window squares make slow flights across the windows. One of the cars will be my mom coming home from work. On the hologram two backup singers with filed red nails and polished hair walk onstage. The singer twirls toward a boy with hair in curling waves. I slide my hands up under my shirt and imagine they’re someone else’s hands.

The hologram makes a scraping sound, the signal leaving. A blue 3D block hangs in midair, shedding light on the couch. My mom says the government doesn’t care much about holograms, since most people have personalized stems. No one who could chose what to watch all the time would turn on a hologram and risk seeing something they didn’t want to see. A shape emerges on the hologram, a head. It is the head of the cultmaster, cheeks a little fat, hair the steel color of a microphone. He is standing with one finger raised and speaking long gravelly



sentences. “-for the lonely ones, sneaking between channels in the night, our lives of predetermined freedom-” I hear the click of the door as my mother climbs out of the car, and I switch off the hologram and scale the steps to my room. *Smoking is bad for every organ in your body*, said the loud anti drug man, marker thumping the blackboard. I want to spit smoke out of a car, let the wind pry bad, thick air out of me and into the night.

The next week is the class aquarium trip. In the second room are the GMO fish, bodies hills of moist muscle, eyes shining wide and raw. They remind me of peeled plums.

A painted panel shows a glossed over picture of a non GMO tuna growing raised white blotches. It says: “fish farms feed GMO fish corn modified with antibiotics, mitigating the effects of diseases spread throughout the fish farms’ crowded tanks. Once released into our oceans, GMO fish act as germ carriers, infecting unmedicated wild fish with fast spreading contagions. Escaped GMO fish induced massive tuna and salmon die backs in vast regions of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.” The fish brush the sides of the tank, bald white eyes staring at us. One thumps against the glass, muscles flattened against the tank like shrink wrapped chicken. Another one has a popped vein which spits blood as it swims.

“I used to love to go to the GMO sections of the supermarket. They’re really great, aren’t they? I would run away from my parent’s shopping cart to feel the juice pears. I loved the juice pears.”

“Me too.” Everyone loves the juice pears. I eat the blackbird plums, too, round red fruit covered with sugary feathers. The blackbird plums huddle together in the fruit bowl like sparrows on a wire. “My mom buys the blackbird plums, too,” I say. Biting into a blackbird plum feels like bursting a blood vessel, breaking something alive. The fruit fills my mouth with juice.

“Those are good. Some people think they taste like blood, but I think they’re good.” Abigail presses one hand to the tank, GMO fish stare plastic eyed and mouth her fingers through the glass. “This is all we are, underneath everything. I used to visit the aquarium and imagine what GMO humans would look like.”

“Pretty gross,” I say, and Abigail throws up both hands and laughs like a bell.

“Pretty rude, too,” she says. “No one wants to see what’s under your skin. That’s why we have bathrooms, after all.” A sticky thread dangles from under one fish’s tail. It hangs dead in the water, surrounded by split veins. I laugh too because she’s right, it is rude.

“Kyra needs to go to the bathroom, mind if I take her?” The teacher nods, asks if she comes here often, and Abigail grins at the endless rows of tanks.

“I’ve come here ever since a little kid. My parents would just leave me here if they couldn’t get a babysitter, because they knew I wouldn’t go anywhere.” The teacher smiles, responds inaudibly, and Abigail laughs, words spilling from her outstretched hands.

She takes my hand quickly, stiff nails needling my palms. We dart between corridors, she pulls me down a very narrow staircase where our steps reverberate. “I’m going to show you something great,” Abigail says, running down three flights of stairs in long coordinated falls. She raises one finger to her lips, motioning for silence in the steel stairs vibrating with noise. “I have a friend who’s dad works here,” her voice is an exaggerated whisper. A gleaming square card slips out of her pocket and into an old metal slot. A light flashes red and a lock clicks back inside the door. It is a behemoth. Its skin is see through and tough as bone, sealing everything inside. Its eyes are sealed windows, camera lenses widening. I watch blood pour through pressed down veins. Its muscles move like crowded schools of fish. They slide together, nudging the glassy skin like a tank wall.

“It’s a Mexican military device,” Abigail’s hands trace patterns on the glass. “They destroyed most of them, after the war. But not this one.” She reaches out, taps a little rhythm on the glass. It’s black eye expands like a tiny mouth on the side of its head. Abigail speaks in pulsing whispers, and the behemoth starts swimming in giant smooth motions. “Come on over, big guy. Talk to me,” Abigail’s smile fades, tapping pings on the tank. “He reminds me of a dragon. I know he doesn’t have wings or breath fire, he doesn’t look like a dragon at all, but that’s what he reminds me of.” The walls echo, the behemoth brushes against the glass, fins outstretched to balance in the water. The tank shudders when he touches it. Abigail presses my hand to the glass, and I feel it shaking. I grow in the tiny underground room, red heart kicked forward, blood streaking like wind pushed clouds. I imagine escaped behemoths, no longer pursuing the enemy, flying boat slick through the ocean. “They say the cultmaster has one in a manmade pond underneath his house. It takes fish from his hands.”

If I was a behemoth, not even the most powerful man in the world could put me in a tank. The cultmaster would need to go to the ocean. He would walk the long breakwater, mist crusting his fat hands. His steel gray hair would dangle limply over the edge. He'd hold out the fish until I took it, gently, with my four rows of cactus point teeth. "If I was him I wouldn't let anyone keep me in a cage," I said, and Abigail nods, staring into the glowing tank lights.

"Your right," she says, "He's a dragon. I once read a book where there was a dragon king. When the dragon king flew overhead, all the villagers blew trumpets, and the dragon heard the low, ringing sound of people worshipping him where ever he went." Our breath pours into the room and trembles hot in my hands. The behemoth sweeps me down with one fin. His name, I realize, is Behemoth. "Behemoth Behemoth Behemoth," I whisper and my voice flows hot over my lips. I bow my head a little under the glowing blue tank lights.

"What are you saying?" Abigail leans close to me. I step back.

"Behemoth," I say, "His name is Behemoth."

She nods slowly, considering. "That's a good name," she says. "A good name."

"Pretty cool, right?" Abigail leaps up the flights of stairs. Our footsteps echo in the stairwell. If there was a real dragon, we would walk to the top of the stairs, to the steel locked door to the roof. The dragon would slam down its swelled wings, shake bricks with fistfuls of sky, send us falling into the shuddering air. We would fly, I think, like blood through Behemoth's veins, swept up by great gatherings of wind.

Abigail walks straight towards the teacher, watchful in the corner of the invertebrate area. "Just letting you know we're back," she says, sweeping towards the boys at the jellyfish tank. "I heard about a guy who got bit by a jellyfish, and he almost died, but now he can't get sick ever again," says the boy with the lisp and the dusty baseball cap. Abigail nods seriously. I dart beside the girl with pigtails and high striped socks.

That night I dream of GMO fish, pale meat nosing through the water. They brush up against me, bodies bloodless and sagging, surround me in lazy half circles. My mom pours them in a glass vase and places them swimming in the center of the coffee table. Sometimes, their heads fall off, and I need to be there to put them back on.

“Do you know Madison, from school?” I am sitting between the couch cushions, one pressing up against either side of me. My mom is sitting down in a chair with a bowl of instant noodles and a cup of coffee.

“I think you’d really like her. Her mom says she also likes drawing. She’s taking art classes.” My mom is raking noodles to her mouth, strands dragging on the table. “I set up a play date for you tomorrow.” I wished she would tuck the ends onto her fork, but she didn’t, and the noodles left watery traces on the finish.

Madison walks into the living room, and her feet kick at the carpet. She looks at the old hologram TV, strokes one hand along the smooth black box. She keeps asking obvious questions. “Do you watch the hologram a lot?”

“Sometimes.” My mom has laid out board games on the table, and rented two 5D movies stacked in a neat square on top of the hologram.

“Do you have a stem?”

“No,” I say. She walks around the room and keeps scuffing her feet and making little folds in the rug.

“Does your mom have a stem?”

She asks what model the stem is, and how it feels to use such an old stem. She asks what channels I watch and who my favorite actors are. I don’t pay attention to actors, so I make some up. I like how the names of actors and actresses sound, like the names of dark fairies with potent magic. “Irena Blackwood,” I say, “I like Edward Eider, too, and Dawn Iris.”

“Do you ever bring friends over?” Her foot picks a furry hill on the carpet. “Why do you always crush up fruit at recess?”

“Why are you doing that to the rug?” I look down at the floor. I look down at the little ruts on the carpet. My mom comes in and asks if we want to watch a movie.

Madison perks up and smiles at my mom. “Yes, what movies do you have?” My mom peers at plastic-covered cases, the library barcodes that overlap half the title.

“Can we see this one? I loved this one, as a kid,” Madison slides a movie out of the pile and my mom loads the hologram.

After a while I stop answering questions and focus on the hologram. The movie is about talking mice who escape an evil animal testing corporation and make friends with a shy boy in

an animated version of New York. There is a bulbous mouse who cracks puns in a squeaky voice. The mice chew a hole through the wall of the evil animal testing corporation, and the mouse's fat legs get stuck. "I guess I should have run on that wheel some more! Get some cardio!" the fat mouse squeals, wriggling in the plaster. The mouse's tail looks like a worm rearing out of a gray apple. The hero is a brown mouse, who leads the way bravely past humans sitting in swivel chair rows. There is also a white mouse, thin as a ghost, who comes up with the escape plan. I pet the back of the runty white mouse over and over again. Her fur is flat and smooth as a bone. I stroke my hand backwards along the white mouse's spine, but the fur feels just as flat.

Steel smooth GMO dogs guard the entrance of the evil animal testing corporation. I trace a stripe on a dog's perfect cold back. The pelt is smooth, flawless as cold light, the line of his spine unfolding like hinges. I try to stick my hand in its mouth, feel its ivory teeth, but there is no feeling filled in. My hand searches in the empty air, as the mice crouch in exaggerated fear in a corner of the doorway. "My, what big teeth you have," says the fat mouse. The white mouse is thinking. It sits on the concrete like a moon, shedding dim white light. I push at a dog's muscly drop of stomach. I think I can feel its big heart beat. The dogs sit like glowing appliances, watching the sky and the building and the pinpricks of animated stars. They shine in the starlight, their hearts tick off seconds; they watch, they measure time. The white mouse steals one of the evil human's electric shock machines. The brown mouse tiptoes towards the dogs' big paws and presses the button again and again. The dogs shake wildly with electricity, their mouths twist silently, their tails spasm like squirted liquid. One snaps its teeth at the air. "Quick! Hurry!" The mice scurry out of the building while the dogs lean forward and collapse. "Under the fence! Before they come to!" the brown mouse vaults between barbed wire. "Whoo!" The fat mouse inhales and his flesh contracts. He squeezes through a hole in the fence. The dogs are shadow lumps in the background.

At the end of the movie, the boy and the mice overthrow the evil animal testing corporation and celebrate by throwing a party. A fizzy pop song plays, and the good characters twist and jitter on the dance floor. "Friends forever/come on, dance" says the song, and the fat mouse says "shake your booty," and the boy lets the mice crawl up his leg and dance on the palms of his hands. I didn't think the white mouse would ever shake her booty or tell the fat

mouse that they'll be friends forever. I miss the dogs, shedding silver light, watching like sitting stars.

My mom comes in with a tray of crackers and cut fruit. "I thought you girls might like a snack. Madison, I heard you're taking painting lessons this year."

Her hair is bobbing and she picks up a toothpick cantaloupe. "Yeah."

"That sounds fun. What have you been working on?"

"We've been painting animals. I painted my dog last week." She is sucking at the toothpick and grinning.

I eat three crackers slowly, letting the crumbs dissolve in my mouth. Madison's mom picks her up ten minutes later. "Good bye!" she says, slamming the car door. I wave and go back inside to sit on the living room floor. I face the wall and mourn the dogs. My mom takes the platter sticky with cantaloupe juice. She fits the uneaten crackers into the plastic case.

"Kyra, honey." Her feet push down the hills of shag carpet. She puts one hand on my shoulder. "Kyra, honey. What about taking painting lessons?" She strokes my spine. "You can do that. You can join the board games club, or the movies club. You can join anything you want to." Her hand is on my arm. Her other hand lifts the washed plate. The bare spot where the rug met the wall presses into my backbone. It feels like a long, flat bone, like the back of a dog.

The next day, I get back my last math test. I got an A, and I hear the teacher smiling, telling Abigail in the hallway before tutoring.

"This deserves some celebration," Abigail grins and motions. "Put your math binder away, we'll go to my house. We'll be back before anyone notices we're gone." Abigail ducks through the side entrance, and we walk carefully between parked cars. "We don't have to drive," Abigail whispers, "It's only a couple blocks."

Her house is square and blue gray with a big maple tree pressing into its side. "I always loved to climb this tree as a kid. I still do, it's an excellent climbing tree." She lifts herself easily onto the first thick branch. I follow, trying to climb silently, slotting my feet into cracks in the bark.

She shrugs her backpack onto the branch and takes a laser pie slicer out of it. The backpack's open flap drops over the limb like a smile. "Hold this here," she gives me the pie. The crust is fancily scalloped. There is a dollop of whipped cream flattened a little by the plastic

wrap. “It’s my mom’s. She baked this for her office party, but she left it in the kitchen when she went to work,” She splits the pie with one bright red line. “I hated to see it go to waste.” The branch jiggles a little as she shifts, pressing one finger conspiratorially to her lips. “It’s our secret.” The glass congeals in my hand like warm ice.

We take turns dipping our fingers in the whipped cream. Cars skid past like running animals. A piece of paper twitches on the sidewalk. Every time a car passes, it leaps up and flashes white. “We used to throw food on our neighbor’s roof,” Abigail says, watching the street. “Different kinds of fruits and vegetables, and see how long it would take for them to fall down. Once we flipped a whole pizza on the roof, and it stayed there for a month, just rotting.”

“What happened to the other food?” Satellite flowers sprout from a square of soil on the neighbors’ rooftop. The GMO flower heads shed quiet metallic light.

“Animals ate them. Squirrels, mostly. We saw them gnawing at peppers and apples, their little eyes glowing. They looked like they were getting away with something.” She smiles, stretching her legs out on the branch. “I guess that’s why the pizza stayed there. Squirrels don’t eat pizza.” I imagine the squirrels streaking from the tree to the roof, dropping from branch to black tile. Running with food clutched in their teeth, sending waves rolling over networks of branches, flipping over the pavement. Burying food ritually, shrugging off fragments of dust. Reaching down to the black earth and planting a seed. Feeding squirrels would be like a secret business transaction, like sending weapons to rebels.

A dark green car rumbles into the driveway. The sheet of paper flashes its white teeth. “That’s my brother,” Abigail smiles, “He just got a job selling cars. Hopefully he’ll get a discount on his next one.” I see stripes of lighter and darker green, tints of orange spreading from the car’s wheels. I imagine the woods from an aerial view, the trees changing from green to orange. “Hi up there!” Abigail’s grown up brother leans against a skinny tree limb. “Are you babysitting?”

“Yeah, this is the neighbor’s kid. The ones a couple blocks down,” She leans down and the branch vibrates. Her hair brushes my face, staticy, like an animal tail.

The brother shifts and shakes the tree limb. “Hi, champ,” he says and smiles “Where did you get that pie?” I look down at his teeth, two rows of little white squares.

“We baked it,” Abigail presses my hand with two fingers. She picks up a spoon stuck in the plastic container and digs at the pie filling.

“Bet you’ve never eaten pie in a tree before,” The brother kicked a pebble a few feet and I knew he would ruffle my hair if I was on the ground. “You always spoil those kids, Abigail,” he says in a laughing voice. “You always spoil them.” He glances at us, shakes his head and steps down the little path towards the door.

“Hey, do you remember when we were kids, we used to throw food up on the neighbor’s roof?” Abigail brings a spoonful of pie to her mouth.

“Yes.” he opens the door and walks inside. “Seriously?” I can hear him say, under his breath, closing the door carefully. The latch makes a short tinny sound as he disappears inside.

“It was funny, but it was a bad thing to do, you know? We were kids, and we liked flipping food on the roof, but imagine how the neighbors felt. It was a bad thing that felt good, you know?” My hand rests on top of the half eaten pie. Filling oozes squishy and cool around my fingers.

“Once we went to an amusement park and cut all the lines. We only had three hours.” My mom caught hold of my hand and we tripped and fell through people flowing in and out of lines. Cotton candy strings floated in the air like smoke and I could see the giant bug shapes of rides over the horizon. “What rides do you want to go on? How about this one? We only have three hours,” my mom’s hands point at chicken leg stands and game booths and huge distorted signboards. Virtual experience booths twisted upwards with floating neon ceilings and shifting walls made of colored gas. When I squeezed my mom’s arm I felt the bone underneath, like the end of a turkey leg. We flew by girls with pink jeans and cotton candy dusted faces. A baby carriage jerked horizontally along by a grinning father. In line for the big roller coaster there is a woman with a wide brimmed hat and lips pursed like cherries. “These people don’t belong here.” When she yells she sounds like an old creaking metal ride. “These people cut the line-did you see that? Security!” The line splits into loud fragments, a three year old boy cries and stuffs his face with fried dough. My mom says sorry, she says we were just going. Families rush past each other and I wonder if anyone is chasing us. My mom’s head bobs in and out of the crowd, her arm pulling me along like an old rope.

“Yeah, that’s also a bad thing that feels good,” Abigail licks pie filling dripping off one finger. “I’ve always thought amusement parks were overrated. Just moving through the crowds is like being put in a sack and shaken. The only part I liked, as a little kid, were the organic rides. I loved those kiddy rides where plants grow under the platform and lift you up.”



Most of the rides were partially organic, tendrils spinning out around and under you as steel wires spun you back and forth. In one ride, a giant root thrust up under your little metal car and sent you flying. The only organic kiddy ride at the fair was a tour through a GMO rainforest. Vibrating petals the size of faces, fig trees growing huge and gnarled before your eyes. Twisting vines expanded, pressing you into the canopy of bright throbbing birds.

“You’re just suspended over the people, shaking each other back and forth, and the roller coasters, throwing everyone up and down. The people on those fast rides never have time to stop and think about whether they’re actually having a good time.” I wondered what happened to the birds after the rides closed. I imagined toucan shapes sweeping above the dim shiny fairground, wings muttering secrets over the pinprick lasers of ferris wheels.

Abigail’s brother walks fast out of the door, a canvas bag shoved under one arm. The car door is old and clatters closed, Abigail’s brother working quickly to shift gears out of the driveway. The engine starts up and I hear the low grind of gas, not a high hum of our bee car. He skids out of the driveway and rumbles past the house. The piece of paper rears up angrily in the road.

“Hey,” she says, “Want to actually bake something? Want to bake cookies?”

We drop flour and spoon milk and press butter in a big ceramic bowl. The dough becomes something sticky and warm, which fits over my hands. It insulates my bare pink fingers. “There should be dough swimming pools,” I say. Jumping in would be like burying your face in a fur coat.

“You wouldn’t be able to swim,” says Abigail, “They would be drifting pools.” I press my hand through the dough and hit the sudden stone-bare bottom. The kitchen smells like warm breath.

“We learned all the countries and capitals this year,” Rolling the dough is repetitive, peaceful. I stretch the dough’s loose skin, smoothing over my rolling pin. It reminds me of stroking a big, indifferent animal.

“I want to go to places I don’t even know about, just because of how their names sound.” Abigail’s hands enclose dough balls, pressing each one in a sticky circle. She dusts fingerprints into the flour.

“Ulaanbatar,” I say. “It’s the capital city of Mongolia.”

“It sounds like a tiger,” she says. “Antananarivo. That sounds like a boat, a boat full of monkeys.”

“Oslo,” I say, “Oslo is an egg.” She is holding dough like eggs, making a warm circle inside both hands. The cookies are curled up, dormant embryos, spread out waiting for incubation.

“Helsinki is a bobcat swimming through a wide river,” Abigail says, “We can shape one more cookie from the little bits of dough left on the counter.” We lean over and scrape the granite bare with our hands.

When they are done, they are beautiful. They are balls of quiet breathing, heat shedding animals. I pick one up, stirring slowly in my hand’s warmth. “Let’s take a picture,” Abigail says. In the photo, we stand carefully, dormant creatures curled against our palms.

A few weeks later, I get another A on a test. Abigail takes me for a drive, this time, both of us lowering our voices as we cross the parking lot. I slide weightlessly into the front seat. The car coasts perfectly out of the parking space, flashing like a metal sunbeam out onto the road.

We sing along to the radio. There is one song with a loud, floating beat. “Chicks in the trunk, chicks in the trunk,” yells a man’s voice against rushing sound. We take turns singing along, lifting a chorus inside the car. I roll down the window and lean outside, the wind stretching my loose cheeks. “Chicks in the trunk, chicks in the trunk!” A dog barks and leaves shudder past. It feels like it’s going to rain, pinpricks of rain making the air like pixels on a hologram.

“Chicks in the trunk,” Abigail whispers, low and urgent. Her voice rises in jagged lines, raw as raindrops. “Chicks in the trunk. Chicks. In the trunk. Chicks! In the Trunk!” She yelps with the rushing leaves, the dog barking, the wind. Leaves stop and rush forward, halting for a wary second in midair. I join in, our staccato voices flushed down the road, lifted spinning in the gaps between houses.

The car parks at a square brick building, mortar cracked and pooling in the gaps. “I’m going to show you something special, something secret,” Abigail flings the door open, and walks towards the backseat. My door sweeps open, she presses a folded flyer in my hand. There are bars of music stamped across the inside, music with lines of words underneath.

We move into the building, and we are surrounded by people. People are swarming, throbbing half-out of chairs, throwing out fragments of speech. “Last time, when no one knew-” a big-shouldered teenager with a cobalt blue mohawk. “He always, he always,” a grown-up woman with dirty ropes of hair hanging around a triangular face. “It’s amazing! It’s amazing!” a man with smooth dark suit and a mouth lined with hopeful creases. People look like bees buzzing against an engine tank. My mom showed me once, prying open the heat seared hood. Our car’s glassed in engine box piled with churning bees. Stacks of bees, pressed in cubes, moving like someone was shaking the box up and down. I put a finger against the glass and felt the stinging heat. “They make the heat that runs the car,” my mom said, “Don’t leave your finger there for too long.”

“Do the bees get hurt? Why don’t they burn up, with all the heat?” I asked my mom. My mom shook her head, motioned me back.

“Bee bodies are tough. And there are chemicals in there, to make sure the temperature never gets beyond a certain point. There are even chemicals to make the bees calm, and happy.” She lowered the hood, a gray wall dropping on the bees, on the white hot engine. I wonder what it is like to be a bee. Moving in constant happiness, tossed back and forth against blank, jarring walls.

We sit on padded folding chairs. A middle aged person with slid-back hair walks to the front of the room. Their skinny arms fall out of a dark loose shirt, bones sticking out like plastic. I can’t tell whether they’re a girl or a boy. Most people look up and slide inwards. Groups of closed-in teenagers yelp and lift their arms. “We’ll start with “Love Will Lift Us,” says the person, and her voice rises right then, everyone flipping pamphlets to find the song.

We sing. The dark suited man in front of me has a dropping, clattering voice, splashing on the floor. The blue mohawked boy slides hotfooted through the crowd, throwing high pitched yelps across the room. The woman with dirty hair throws her head backward and forward, flowing sound like a sprinkler. It is a flood, sweeping along leaves and trash. I don’t know what I’m saying, the words swell to five times their normal size. There is a dog squirming between legs, a couple dancing near the front of the room. The man spins and spurts song. The woman is laughing, and twirling, and twisting his hand like a clump of grass.

The song swells and grows into another song, another chorus, the dark suited man holding a low note and frantically flipping through the pamphlet. The blue mohawked boy screeches cut off words to the ceiling. We sing three songs, maybe more, then the cultmaster comes on stage, and everyone is quiet. He looks like on TV, steely gray eyes and tree trunk shoulders. His eyebrows fold in when he speaks. "If you are here, you know humanity is not growing up. We devolve, we're getting weaker and younger every day. If you've heard the irrational rantings of the government, you know they're children. If you know the ridiculous detours of the media, you know they're maybe even younger. You know it's physical, our limbs are soft meat, we are as full of pills as the cows and the chickens we eat." His mouth gapes for a second, red and deep. His thick tongue trembles. "We have devolved, with failing eyesight and perpetually crooked teeth, reliant on machines like our parents. I am young, and you are even younger." He stretches both arms, suit drooping over the stage. "We don't even know enough to celebrate youth. We're young, and worried, and our blindness makes us even more anxious."

My mom is at home, dragging instant noodles over the table. Madison is dragging a mealy pencil across heavy glossed paper. The woman next to me drags hanging blonde hair and rocks back and forth, nodding like an old tree. Abigail's head falls upward, mouth half open, skin parched by fluorescent light. The cultmaster's arms are sacks of low hanging muscles, his mouth is leaking like an old facet.

"The travesty is we have the power to adopt, to evolve, to harden our muscles and our brains. Science shows us how to reshape our cells, we can evolve ourselves and most of us stay soft meat." The cultmaster's arms shake, his whole body is trembling. His big fingers paw at a suit pocket, his steely eyes are creased half shut. He draws out a sharp little knife, red as an apple, point bit by light.

The cultmaster stops breathing for a second, mouth twisting like an old leaf. He folds the knife in a long crease of arm. Scraps of skin peel off in curls, the knife blade twisting in the wound, his mouth crumpled up in effort. He leaks juice, puddling sticky on his hands and dripping down his arm. "I have water in my organs," he says, mouth open and gasping. "You cut a big root, a tuber, water all spurting out." The cultmaster's tough hands wedge open the split, his arms groan like an old ship. His flesh is solid and tan, lined with dark veins. Abigail leans against a chair, and the dirty haired woman lets out a low shaking sound. There is a layer of cracked dirt on the tile floor, stamped in sneaker patterns. The blue mohawked boy crowds

against a group of other teenagers pressing towards the raised platform. The cultmaster holds the arm up for the crowd to see. Inside his tan arm is another layer of flesh, light pink and sweating moisture. He lets go in one heavy breath. The wound snaps shut, the click of a suitcase closing. There is only a crack now, spreading an inch down his arm. "It's time now, for all who want to convert."

Abigail reaches to stroke back my hair. "I will be a new person, when you see me. He's amazing, isn't he?" Her hair streaks her face like a sunset, curls up like a sleeping bear.

"What's your name?" His hand is on Abigail's shoulder, bits of callus peeling off his fingertips. She tells him, glancing into his old metal eyes. The boney armed person wheels a sleek, indescribable machine towards Abigail. She nods, again, watches a colored gas screen wavering. There are people mouthing words next to me, too crowded and quiet for me to hear. The man with the creased, hopeful mouth lifts his head to the ceiling, white and bare as the sun. There is the needle, twisted at the end, the chemicals turning Abigail's skin translucent and yellow. She smiles hugely under the colored light. The cultmaster stands by, heart marking out time. The lamps paint their faces like the skin of fruit.

Abigail holds my shoulders like two eggs, shaping her hands around the sticking out bones. "It doesn't hurt. Don't be afraid. It's amazing. It's amazing."

She lifts my arm, and we walk towards the cultmaster. "Do you want to do this?" his big hands brush my shoulders, sweep dust off my T-shirt in clumsy movements. I say yes. I look at the blue mohawked boy, sweat leaking into the pamphlet crushed in one hand. I look at the woman with dirty hanging hair, head drifting back and forth. I could draw that beat, that smooth invisible beat she moves in time with. I can't know anything else about her besides what I can tell by looking. Her eyes are blue and half closed. I look at the crease faced man, head pointed at the ceiling, dark suit falling down like an ocean. I can see Abigail, mouth twitched into a smile, glancing at me with secret sharing eyes.

"I am her sister," says Abigail.

"It is good to know children want to do this. You are going to grow tall, tall for the next generation. What's your name?" The cultmaster smiles, liquid drips down the side of his neck. I can see it is not sweat, now, a thick liquid tinted with amber. I remember the cultmaster lived in jail. I wonder if it's the jail my mom drives by on the way to the car wash. The jail with walls the color of old bread and endless lines of windows. His muscles twist like a trickle of water. I

remember the stream behind my house, old and rust colored. I remember Abigail's hair curling up like an animal tail. I remember sculpting perfect conversations with strangers in the hallway.

"I'm Kyra." The sticky sweat leaves dried up lines all over his neck. His eyebrows are pressed together, his feet move back and forth against the tile, the little knife handle is stuck in one hand. "What's your name? You're always called the cultmaster. What's your name?"

"John," he says, "My name is John." I open my mouth to say something else, but the air drops in quiet sheaths. I look through a flickering sunset, the blue mohawk is rust orange with purple shadows. The cultmaster's face is burnt with light, eyes puckered in white skin. I see his heart jolting on his neck, hard and circular as an apple, beating seconds into a blank neck.

Abigail leads me out to the car. "That was amazing. That was amazing. You are stronger now, you are changed. I am too. We both are." She babbles lifting her arms up and down. Flesh jiggles up and down her arm bones. She looks crazy. Lines of sweaty people walk out of the gym, stopping to talk and swing open the doors of cars. I walk to the edge of the parking lot and throw up.

"That's normal. It's your body, cleansing itself of toxins, adapting to the new chemicals. I'll clean you up," We go to the bathroom then back out to the parking lot. There are police cars sliding in, hanging in the parking lot like a low white cloud. I drag my feet into the car, a black woman with streaming curls sits at the police car window, a lanky freckled man is behind her. I watch Abigail rush into the car, stab her key in the ignition. The freckled police officer is out talking to the blonde woman, who rocks and spits words. Her hair hangs in curtained rust-colored waves. "Hi," I mouth to the police officers, "Hi." The man leans into the woman's curtains of hair. I touch the freckled police officer's face with my eyes. I knock at the window, but Abigail pulls out before anyone can notice.

Abigail pushes towards the highway, slots the car between an old blue truck and a school bus. She keeps talking about what to expect, what will happen when I go home. Abigail pulls over and throws up out the window. She doesn't have time to get out of the car. "Expect to be a little sick the next few days," she says, "Take acetaminophen, those are the good ones, those don't hurt your stomach." Abigail's tongue runs up to touch her teeth. She is babbling like a crazy person, arms flopping over the steering wheel. I hang out the window. I wanted to press the dough balls in perfect circles, leave them out on the tray to dry. Abigail did that, but I wanted to,

I wanted to fit the dough into warm holes between my palms. I wanted to leave traces of dusty fingerprints.

We drive past boxes of grass fit into grids of square stores. The window is open and I hear bees buzzing in cars all around, a soft sound like rain. Bee sounds wash over us in the crowded parking lots, making it hard to speak for a few seconds. I scratch the papery coating off my fingers, the hand underneath burns hard and red. “You’re changed now, Kyra, your parents might not appreciate it now, but they will. They’ll get changed, soon, too, everyone will be new again.” A cut open can fills with brown rainwater on the side of the road.

We pass a mall guarded by lines of flashing cars. Abigail’s fist punches her stomach, shucking layers of white skin. Her other hand wrenches the steering wheel around and around, turning the car like a dog on a leash. Tires yelp, surprised cars shift around us. “Kyra, I need to take you back home soon,” Abigail mouths the air. “Kyra,” Her face is wrinkled inward like an old woman, or the skin of some exotic fruit. “Kyra, do you want me to get you something from the store?”

“No.” If I ate something I would throw up again. I want to throw up, right now, on the pavement. On the flashing metal of the car next to us. The sound of a million bees buzzing is the sound of something soft slapped over and over. Every week, my mom scrapes the bee carcasses out of the engine with dirty white gloves. “What did they do, with the behemoth at the aquarium?” I tug on Abigail’s sleeve. “What did they do with him, before?”

“He fought. He was a dragon, fighting for the military,” she says. I claw skin off my arm, press the tough surface underneath. I open the door and throw up. The bees sound too loud, if the bees are too loud the car will melt down into poison liquid. Burning glass and metal and plastic will melt the bee’s stomachs, make hard cases around their bodies.

“The car is overheating,” I say. “The bees are too loud. They’re making too much heat.” I go out, I burn, my arms growing out of the peeled off layers of skin. I walk to the car’s front and heave open the hood. “What did they do with the other behemoths? What did they do with them?”

“Kyra, the car’s not overheating.” Abigail is tilted halfway off the seat. “Come back here, it’s OK, come back here.” She needs to come out and look under the hood. She needs to answer me. In car wrecks, bees burrow through rotten engine boxes. Wings melt into warped clumps. Sometimes, they try to fly, with wings turned into blobs of melted plastic.

“I’m sorry, that was the last one,” Abigail says, a voice bursting from inside the car. “It’s special, that one I showed you, because it’s the last.”

I try to force open the metal door to the engine box. I hit the sweating door, listen to the ringing knock of metal against wood. I can’t get the engine door open so I sit down on the pavement and listen to my hand reverberate.

I read bugs tunnel through living sea creatures, get cooked with fish flesh in food factories. The behemoth’s body could surge with insects. Bees battering against his stomach walls and thick veins, tiny hairs rubbing the back of his eyes. I am sick. I need to be put to bed with a bowl of soup and a static hologram. I lean over and press my stomach to the front of the car.

Abigail’s clothes hang with spreading stains. “Come on, Kyra,” she is whispering, doubled over. “Come on back,” she says. She looks like a creased paper airplane, walking with both hands pressing the side of the car. “Let’s go to the car,” I say. I press her body upwards, and we move across the parking lot in little bursts together. I count out our steps to a low beat, step, step, step. “Chicks in the trunk,” I mouth in time with our shifting feet, “chicks in the trunk, chicks in the trunk.” She slumps down, arms dropping over the seat, and I cover her up with my coat. I run my finger down her hand. Her skin is old wood now, I could carve my name into it. “Chicks in the trunk, chicks in the trunk,” the beats twitch inside my neck. I imagine baby birds with raw stubs of feathers, stacked in the back of an airless car.

During the war, people papered the ocean floor with shot down behemoths. If you dive to the ocean’s bottom, you can see the sand heaped with broken skins. You can walk across blue-gray growths pooling on the glass, the pencil shaving flakes of organs and soft bones. He would have swum there, brushed heaps of glass with dented fins, eyes expanding to see for miles.

The police catch up in half an hour, bright neon and a car like a sleek predator. The two cars pull up nose to tail on the side of the road. The police officers emerge with stern muscles. My mom rushes out with her coat hanging out. “Kyra, Kyra, Kyra.” Her neck veins rise like bones. She is clutching me, one hand pressed into each shoulder, like Abigail held me. “You were gone for so long, no one could find you, Kyra, Kyra.” Her voice slides together, a crowded bloodstream, a wave of light and noise and sound. I clutch her shoulders and I am crying, but my



tears taste like water and sugar. Abigail is crying, too, crying and throwing up on the side of the road, the police officers mumbling and leaning forward. My mom leads me inside the police car, the separation plate cutting tough and glassy like a behemoth's skin.

Abigail sits in the front seat, the separation plate stretching her hair into hazy strands. I press fingerprints onto the glass and watch the marks dissolve. There is distance there, thousands of densely packed particles of air and plastic, spaces too tiny for water to leak between. My mom's face stretches, eyes propped open, lines falling around her cheeks. She is old, I think, she is old and dissolving in the rain. I touch her shoulder with muscles hardening into branches, old wood freezing my bones. I will watch, I think, the sky flowing past like an unending behemoth, the clouds expanding like cataracts in its eyes. The windows are great tank walls, but I don't need to do anything besides watch and listen. My skin will twist old and gnarled. I will grow in the house, in the classroom, in the bare, churning parking lot, the soft bee rain will flow through my roots.