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Honors Papers. 817.

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Where Do You Go When You Go Home?

Narrative Studies of Gender Euphoria

CAS Honors Thesis by Silas Crewe-Kluge

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Introduction

I understand the world through the stories our bodies tell, and the stories we can tell about our bodies. I have been trained to understand the world this way for most of my life, first as a dancer and a choreographer, and now as a writer. When I began the first iteration of this project, I didn't know how relevant these interests would become. It has been years now since I first started asking questions about gender euphoria, and over time it became apparent to me that stories were, as they often are, the truest form my work here could take.

This collection, in its four parts, is written from and orbits this same central theme: *gender euphoria*. An informal term mostly utilized in online queer spaces, gender euphoria is a play on and inversion of *gender dysphoria*, a diagnosis of discomfort with one's own body that is often necessary to gain access to things like hormones, surgeries, and legitimacy. Whereas gender dysphoria exists as a medical term, a symptom to be cured to achieve normalcy, gender euphoria indicates something more utopic and possibly more accurate. Many transgender and gender non-conforming (GNC) people do experience gender dysphoria, but not every one of us. When trans and GNC people experience pain and oppression, it is specific to the context of our individual lives, needs, and other identities, and while we might see ourselves in each other, we are never quite the same. What would it be like to identify trans and GNC people by what they know themselves to be, instead of by a diagnosis of incongruity with their bodies? What would it be like if we could explain ourselves not just with our pain, but also with our joy at becoming ourselves? And would it be like to live in that joyful and painful becoming, and not have to explain ourselves at all?

I draw these questions not only from my own life and the lives of those I love, but also from a wider scholarly precedent. Scholars in the field of queer studies have been writing on the

uses and effects of queer joy and futurity for decades. Two works of great interest to me are Michael D. Snediker's *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* and, in particular, José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. In the former, using optimism as a main conceit, Snediker calls for a "reconceptualization of optimism,"¹ not as a worldview that necessarily aspires "toward happiness, but instead finds happiness *interesting*."² That *interest*, that ability and willingness to give queer happiness the same intellectual rigor as queer trauma, inspires me greatly. *Cruising Utopia* calls for a similar emphasis on positive experience, but Muñoz connects a lack of scholarship on queer euphoria and joy to a misemphasis on the present moment in time, arguing instead for an abandonment of the "here and now" in favor of the "then and there."³ Muñoz's imperative call to live in and for the future, and specifically a future where queer people are safe and at *home*, rather than outliers under fluctuating degrees of protection from a world that does not welcome them, informs my storytelling and speculation in this project tremendously.

In theory, a turn toward joy and optimism allows for a reprieve from the dominant narratives of suffering in queer studies, perpetuated by foundational work like Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. The turn feels overdue and urgent in a world where suffering presents itself to us readily, whether we think about it or not. In practice, however, a focus on gender euphoria turns out to be more complicated than simply choosing pleasure over pain. Joy and pain are not mutually exclusive. Also, neither are permanent or absolute states. There is no fixed point during any kind of gender transition before which comes only dysphoria and after which comes only euphoria. Transition never even has a clear start or end point: it

¹ Snediker, Michael D. *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.), p. 2

² Ibid, p. 3

³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, New York: NYU Press, 2009), p. 1-18.

changes person to person and instant to instant. It is an ongoing action toward expressing personhood. All of this makes gender euphoria difficult to define exactly, because it is so individual and contextual. It is important to me to maintain the nuance of that context, the everything-else of a person's life, because our expectations, fears, and selfhoods relating to gender come from the lives we live. As has been consistently shown by many scholars and, in particular, Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*⁴, gender is enacted largely through socialization, and our understandings of gender are not innate.

An attempt at a universal definition of gender euphoria, one that approaches the medical specificity of gender *dysphoria*, would only serve to homogenize a large and diverse group of people based on one shared (or even just similar) trait. Assuming a universal transgender and gender non-conforming experience is an old problem, and not one I am keen on contributing to, even if I could convince myself that such a definition would be possible to make. Instead, I will provide a more approximate definition. For the sake of this project, I define gender euphoria as a state of being, often but not always ecstatic, realized when one is recognized as the gender one identifies with, either by oneself or by outside observers. This project argues that gender euphoria warrants narrative prioritization and exploration because it is sacred, complex, and legitimate.

In preparation for this project, I had conversations with friends, near-strangers, and total strangers, from a variety of experiences and identities that, while by no means comprehensive or indicative of all transgender and gender non-conforming experience, to me still illustrates the range of how we live with and move across, into and out of gender within our varient lives. I interacted with other pieces of art and testimonial, too, including diary entries,

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1990).

poetry/installation, and the photographs featured in the three-part *Entry* series in this collection. Drawing from this archive composed of conversations and art works, I wrote these four pieces to express some of what I have gathered about gender euphoria and what it can be. By listening to myself and others and *then* writing, I allowed myself to write about the context, the pain, and the struggle surrounding joy and euphoria, instead of attempting to write about euphoria in isolation. Rather than just being about joy, gender euphoria through this project has become an indication of the complex process of not only discovering and recognizing oneself, but *coming to terms* with the self one recognizes. Further, the individual has to reach an understanding of that self to be good. Our world is not one where transness and gender non-conformity are immediately understood as good and beautiful. Deeply ingrained structures of binary and hierarchical gender values send us a message: transition and transgression are not condoned, and are often even shameful and punishable. When we recognize ourselves and each other, there is a way in which we must rely on ourselves to know that we are good, and that there is nothing wrong with us.

To express and record what I am lucky enough to have collected from the people and artists who inspire me, I have chosen to write these four pieces without worrying over the constraints of a certain genre. One of the core tenets of Comparative American Studies methodology that drew me to the field in the first place is its interdisciplinarity. Rather than beginning with a specific lens and only looking at a research subject through that lens, CAS allows for an inverted approach in which the lenses are chosen based on the subject at hand, so as to draw on the best bodies of knowledge available when studying and writing about a topic. It is in this interdisciplinary spirit that I apply a range of genre techniques and structures based on what each piece expresses about gender euphoria and how it can manifest. Each of the four pieces have a central concept I associate with experiences of gender euphoria. The four concepts,

in the order of their respective chapters, are *recognition*, *time*, *capture*, and *exit*. *Recognition* refers to the ways we see ourselves in the people around us, often before we are able to turn inward. *Time* can be a powerful force toward gaining selfhood, both in its passage and also in the ways it can be manipulated through memory, trauma, and reclamation. *Capture* refers to the “caught” feeling of being understood by yourself or others, in the sense of a kind of shock or arrest, but also in the sense of being “caught” while falling. *Exit* is not just a utopian ideal, a yearning to leave the present because you don’t feel like you belong or are wanted there, but also an idea that begs the follow-up question, *Where do you go?* In all four pieces, I use techniques of fiction, creative nonfiction, and autotheory, with each being prevalent in different places. Two of the pieces can be identified readily as speculative fiction, although speculation is at work (and play) in all of my writing here.

For me, this was never simply a creative project. Doing this work through the focus of Comparative American Studies allowed me to do what was most important to me in writing these stories, and that is to prioritize justice and empowerment when writing about people I know (and don’t) and love. Rather than escapism, I use writing as an active force against the message we gather from dominant gender structures and hierarchies, which is that trans and GNC people do not/should not exist, at least not publicly. Storytelling, be it in any way fiction or not, comes with a responsibility, both to the people one is aiming to represent in one’s writing, and to the people who will read and perhaps find themselves in it. I’ve never believed that “creative freedom” ought to exempt anyone from that responsibility. I owe a rigor of compassion to the people in the world I write about and for. By utilizing what I’ve gathered from my undergraduate study of social structures of power and oppression, I’m able to utilize an interdisciplinary approach to my work that (ideally) ties it to a real world beyond myself and what I know.

I am infinitely grateful to everyone who has contributed their energy and insight to this project. It is my hope that in these stories my readers can find themselves and others, and understand each a little better.

Sawyer

The air between the walls of the new houses felt light and sticky on our forearms, like it was from a different place than the air we pulled into our masks. Our breaths hung damply from our mouths and noses until we could get outside and unmask ourselves and let the condensation dry into the morning air. From the outside, the empty houses looked more alive than the empty patches where their lawns would be. Instead of sod, the development had gotten permission to plant native grasses, wildflowers, and rocks, but now it was just modular sections of dirt greying in the February sun. We'd been contracted to paint the insides of the Nova Village smart homes about a month ago. It was still cold enough to dry out our nostrils painfully and keep us sleepy. Inside the houses it was a little warmer, but you had to wear the mask. You could smoke outside, and we did. We'd look around at the houses and their slightly different shapes according to their locations across the hilly dirt. Their windows twisted like the faces of awkward sunflowers to let optimal amounts of light in. We guessed. We never met anyone who worked on the windows. Unlike the windows, the houses were painted the same as most houses, so that work could be outsourced to the lowest bidder. The lowest bidder was a former boyfriend of my mother's, someone we knew from church. He was the one who employed us.

Us. Myself and three others. I called us *us* in my head. Sometimes this was a soothing thing to do and sometimes it was the opposite. We'd worked together since I moved out. There was Matthison, who was beautiful and smelled like old cut grass. Blond hair dusted the length of his arms, shoulder to wrist, and slicked flat and dark when he sweat. He was almost as young as I was, but very stoic. There was Tommy, who was slight and friendly. He made his jokes self-consciously, cruel or not, quickly changing the subject and scratching his forehead in a way that hid most of his face behind his hand. And there was Jorge, wide and tall, older than the rest

of us by at least twenty years. He lifted heavy things for all of us, not just me, and he was our leader. This had been obvious to me when I met him, like he had been the leader many times before, and no one had ever minded before and he wasn't expecting anyone to soon. I was the youngest, but I had been painting for Ben as long as I could work, usually on a team of girls from the church. The men I worked with were not from the church. They were from Indeed.com. I lived in their world now, and I worked their shifts, often early on weekend mornings, which was when I used to preach.

Jorge led the way out for a break. We followed him like ducklings. I watched him peel off his mask, an alien astronaut snuffling on a cold new planet. He fished out a cigarette. Matthison, Tommy and I fanned out in a semicircle around him. Matt asked for one of my cigarettes, which he had bought for me. He lived with his mother and I slept in their attic. I rarely saw him when we weren't working. He was at least twenty-one. I was eighteen. I looked younger.

Jorge coughed into his fist and then indicated the smooth green shoulder of my shirt. "Sawyer," he announced.

"Hm." I lit my cigarette behind my hand. I could feel Tommy and Matt smiling slightly.

"Why'd you wear that?"

We never talked explicitly about how my body was different from other boys my age, although it was sometimes obvious when I spoke. It wasn't relevant to them like it was to me, and we wouldn't have known what to say to each other. And anyway, I had explained it to the three men the day I met them. That had seemed to me like the least dangerous way to do it. But even when I dressed to look like a man I looked like a strange man. My shirt was a men's shirt. It was green and I always hung it up at night so it wouldn't wrinkle. I had two pairs of jeans, matte with paint, and I would tuck the green shirt into it. I wasn't worried about whether or not I

looked professional. It was just because I so desperately cared for the few things I owned. That morning a splash of primer had soaked across my shoulder. The question was not why I wore the stained shirt, but rather why I wore a shirt with a collar and the sleeves symmetrically rolled. The overall effect wasn't feminine, but made me seem careful and even fussy, more so than how I acted. Less like a painter. I didn't know how to explain that I had never learned another way to dress myself.

Playing dumb was one of the survival tactics that carried me to adulthood. I pretended not to understand. "My painting clothes?"

A few seconds of awkward, laughlike sounds, and then Matt asked, "Why do you wear your clothes, Jorge?"

"What?"

Matt shook his head like he was offended. Jorge shrugged to himself and smoked. Tommy glanced at me like he and I were two observers looking in on this social situation, rather than half its participants. Tommy dragged his heel over the soil. He made a little "Hm" sound. Then, so quietly I don't think the other men could hear, he said to me, "Really don't care, man." I nodded. He nodded back, looking square into the air behind my head.

In the evening Matt's girlfriend Sydney drove us to his mom's house. He didn't get out of the car when I did. I waved to them both over my shoulder and then went up to the attic noiselessly, in case anyone else was home. The first place I went when my mother kicked me out fourteen weeks ago was the home of this family I didn't know. They were also from the church, but a town over. They kept me in a little three-walled room by their back door, so I never had to see them, which made it easier for everyone because they weren't supposed to speak to me. I found myself missing that total invisibility a little. In the attic I sprawled on my stomach on the

floor, my ear pressed against the dusty wood so I could listen for the reverberations of other people in the house. I stayed like that for two minutes until I was sure the house was empty. I crept downstairs and showered with the door locked, scrubbing my body hard without looking away. I dressed myself in clean clothes, checking my reflection in the attic window. I got down to listen one more time because I wanted to leave without being seen. And then I left.

I was too young to meet Anna at a bar, but I wasn't like most men, and that meant I could come to her apartment. That's where I always met her, even the first time. If she was desperate for me, she probably wouldn't have been as comfortable with our arrangement. But because I was instead desperate for her, she had that power to herself, and she was safe. She had nothing to worry about. Neither did I. Not desperate, but she had sought me out with a genuine intention, and one that wouldn't let her hurt me. I couldn't be hurt too badly then, anyway. I was in a uniquely invulnerable and terrified state where I was incapable of feeling safe after having lost everything just months ago, but there was no loss that could actually matter to me anymore.

Anna answered the door before I knocked. My stomach hurt about it, but I tried to look pleasant. I swallowed. She spoke my name and let me inside, hugging me once the door was shut again. I could never really remember anything about what her apartment looked like, even though I was here often. Anna herself barely looked familiar among her things. She was almost my height, with thin black hair that ended at the bottom of her shoulder blades. She was in her early thirties. She stepped into the kitchen and I went into her bedroom, alone.

I sat on a daybed under a covered window. Music trickled out of a fist-sized blue speaker on the floor, I didn't know what. The floor was otherwise clean, the drawers and closet were shut, and the bed was made with no comforter, only sheets in a relatively conservative shade of red. On the wall hung a framed photograph of Anna with her arms around a small, stocky man

named Liam. He was her husband and he was dead. Anna had told me this in a direct message on the dating app where she had encountered me. Liam and his death were the reason I was here. Anna couldn't, for now, bear to be intimate with a man who didn't look, in places, like Liam.

Anna came in with two thick blue glasses and a bottle of red wine with a print of a thrashing bull on the label. She handed a glass to me and filled it. I cleared my throat before I thanked her and she smiled. "Your voice is getting lower," she said.

"Thanks." I swallowed a mouthful of wine. It tasted like soot. I waited for Anna to tell me what my new voice meant for me. But instead she sat next to me and asked how work was.

"Still those smart homes." I made my face smile. "They look pretty much the same as every other house I've painted." Anna knew the rough shape of my life and where I came from but never much more than that. I met her less than a month after I left. Was made to leave. Those kinds of things show up on a person's face. She didn't have to ask very many questions. She wasn't desperate, and I was comfortable with the way she treated me. I didn't want it to change.

Anna swirled the wine around in her glass. I don't think she could help the gesture. It was not especially nice wine, I don't think, but I couldn't tell. "Didn't all those guys and whoever who wrote science fiction spend last century telling us not to build smart homes? And AI? And yet."

I nodded and drank. It left a bloody taste in my mouth, which I ignored. I sat up straighter. "How deep would you say my voice is?"

Anna studied me, narrowing her eyes. "It's certainly noticeable. It's developing some lovely textures."

I didn't know what she meant so I waited.

“It’s changing fast. Working fast, I mean.” She smiled unselfconsciously. “Are you happy with how you sound?”

I nodded, even though I never listened to myself speak. Anna’s approval was what my desperation was for. The doctor at the PrideCare clinic never looked at me like Anna looked at me. I didn’t have to like it, exactly, for it to feel good. Her wanting came from a hurt and honest place. It didn’t matter who I was, which meant I didn’t have to define the boundaries of myself, where I ended and someone else could start. When she moved to put her arm around my waist I tried to make myself soft against her body. I drank wine, quickly, until my teeth felt cold and I got dizzy when I shut my eyes. Eventually Anna placed her hand on the back of my head and pulled me. I slid off the daybed and onto my knees. I kept my jacket on and Anna never asked me to take it off.

I ate cold pasta in the light of the refrigerator after Anna fell asleep. This was part of the agreement, ours. The first night I came over Anna had put her hands on my waist and gasped at how thin I was. This was to my advantage because it fed me. I ate the contents of the glass container and washed it in the sink without turning on any lights. I didn’t see anyone on my walk home, and I think everyone in Matt’s mom’s house was asleep by then. I crawled into bed with my jeans on. I hadn’t washed my face and my skin was still ripe with her body, slightly tacky. I ran my fingers over my chin, feeling for hair. There wasn’t any more than the day before. I pictured the little pink razor I kept in my backpack. What if I couldn’t remember how to shave my own body? I could get hurt. That would be alright. It was whether or not someone could tell that mattered.

I almost couldn't wear my green shirt again after I stained it. I thought my fear that someone would point the stain out to me would be too obvious and make someone point the stain out to me. But I wore it and nobody said anything. We were too busy trying to fit our bodies into the narrowest spots in the houses to tape and paint. We didn't complain, quite. Someone'd set something down heavy and smile without meaning it, that kind of thing. I tried to participate, but I had trouble making enough noise.

Nobody said it because nobody had to, but I was a good shape to have around. I could climb up, down, or into almost everywhere. My mother used to say I would disappear if I turned sideways. As a really young kid, I believed her. The men didn't mind if they couldn't see me. They nodded me to the ladder and tossed me rolls of green tape to hang around my wrists like bangles while I climbed. Once while I was coming down the ladder Tommy threw his arms open under my body and yelled, "Jump! I'll catch you!" and I didn't. I laughed into the two-pronged snout of my mask and he slapped my shoulder with an open palm when I returned to Earth. For a second I thought he might be close enough to smell my sweat, and how it differed from his, and I went cold, even though he knew already. I didn't need a good reason in order to get afraid. But he just hefted the stepladder with a general-area "move it" and then carried it away. I stood still. I could smell his sweat. For a second he smelled scary, even though he wasn't, I knew already.

It was hard to tell when we moved from one house to another. It was hard to tell how to enter or exit the development, or whether you were still in it. I just followed Jorge. We all did. He always seemed to know where he was going, in a quiet, lonely way. He'd talk about mundane things, like how he wanted a new pair of boots or how he was thinking about taking his sister bowling for her birthday at the alley where she used to work (she'd be in town this year) or how

he had started drinking his coffee black again and he was sure it gave him more energy. The engine of his life ran smoothly, automatically. He fascinated me, and we fascinated him, so we'd talk back. Jorge was a nice guy you wanted to impress, and whose reactions to being impressed were often exaggerated and always warm. We all talked about ourselves around him. We learned about each other that way. I knew about Matt's meticulous work ethic, which seemed to come from a nebulous spiritual understanding of the world he couldn't (or wouldn't) explain to us. I knew about Tommy's ex-wife, who he called crazy, and who he was obviously terrified of. And I knew that Jorge was afraid of dying in a way that was so sure and so foreign to me that I couldn't stop thinking about it. I'd been scared when I learned that God had no plans to save me from being dead, a year ago, but that's because I thought my death was imminent and didn't know what to do in the meantime. But Jorge was meticulous about prolonging his life in some ways and decided other ways did not apply to him. He wore sunscreen a lot. He said his mother had died of cancer.

“Skin cancer?” I assumed, watching Jorge scrub Banana Boat into his arms hard, like it was meant to heal something under his skin.

“Pancreatic.” Jorge shrugged.

“Sorry.”

Everyone could hear me when I spoke. Matt would look at me, Tommy would look away. Jorge asked why I smoked cigarettes. Was it even still cool, for kids my age? I'd shake my head. No. It wasn't. I wasn't careful about what I revealed about what happened. But that's because only I could remember what it all meant.

Anna mixed a drink in a plastic water bottle full of ice and poured it into a glass for me. It tasted like old fruit and sap and alcohol, which is probably close to what it was. She wanted to know how I was doing. I was amazed she could ask me that every time I came over. The things I did didn't change in between. I'd reached a kind of stasis. I worked, and then I left work in the afternoon when the world was matte with daylight. Someone picked me and Matt up and drove us to his mom's house. I went to the grocery store or the pharmacy or the dog park. I didn't have a dog, but there was something about my bone structure that made my face look a little lost, so I got away with hanging out there fine. In the little life I hid in, almost nothing ever happened to me. I didn't mind. It gave me the quiet to listen to the ringing in my ears. Waiting, Anna put a record on. There was a record player in our living room when I was growing up. I wanted to tell her this, but it felt inappropriate. I told her I was tired.

As Anna kissed my neck I felt a familiar shock of numbness spread across my skin from where it was touched. I held the back of her head almost maternally, hoping that might give me some sense of control over how my body felt. It didn't. The numbness wasn't always familiar. It hadn't started until the end of my first romantic relationship, which lasted four weeks almost to the hour. I don't remember kissing the first girl so much as I remember how it felt to touch our two bodies in the dark, various points, skin, meat, bone. One of the things I wanted was for kissing to feel that way again. So I pulled back from Anna just long enough to take my shirt off, upsetting my glasses. I took those off too. Anna put her hand flat on my stomach and resumed kissing me. I breathed long breaths and short ones at the appropriate times. She didn't move her hand. I watched her hand not move. I watched my skin grow cold around it, picturing frost

climbing up my chest like a window pane. So I pulled away again and put my shirt back on, keeping my glasses off so I couldn't quite see her. "Sorry," I said. She shrugged and waited for me to hold still, gauging when it would become appropriate to kiss me again.

In the small kitchen later I poured whiskey into a plastic cup and sipped it. It tasted less bitter than what Anna had made me. Or maybe the same. I couldn't tell. She was telling me about herself. It was easy to get her to do this. I figured it was a part of her healing process. I was too. I wondered if Anna was part of *my* healing process, or if I got to have one. She was catching me up to the point of knowledge Liam had about her when he died. I was a ghost, her ghost, a conduit through which she could be known by Liam one more time. She didn't know back, but she would look, mostly, enough, at me.

"Did I tell you I thought I might be a boy? When I was still in high school."

I looked up. Anna was sitting up on the counter. She smiled. Maybe I was supposed to get a kick out of this story in some way. I smiled back just in case and she said, "I hadn't even met Liam yet, which is what's funny. I tried for about two weeks, and then I just stopped."

"Tried?" I swallowed the rest of my whiskey, willing my throat to open for it. Sickening heat bloomed in my gut. I hadn't *tried*. I'd still been wearing long skirts to church most days until I cut my hair, learned to give myself injections in a cold office with pink walls, crawled first into a back-door sleeping bag and then under a heap of critter-bitten blankets in the attic over Matt's mom's bedroom. I felt like I'd skipped over something vital in my progress. I could only make up for that vicariously. I made myself keep looking at Anna.

"I put my hair up under a hat, wore my big brother's shirts, but he's, ah—he's so big they'd just kind of." She paused to set her drink down before fluttering her arms at her sides like bad wings. "Nobody could see my chest in there. But I bound anyway, with bandages."

Now I opened my mouth because it felt like the only thing I knew with certainty in the whole world was that binding one's breasts with bandages is very dangerous, but then I closed it again because Anna must have known that already, couldn't not.

"And no one really cared, you know, but I just stopped. It wasn't right." She tapped her fingernails on her bicep for a second and then added, "For me."

This makes me laugh without meaning to. "It's okay, I didn't think it was right at all."

Anna smiled as though thinking that had been a mistake on my part. Arguably, she was right.

"I never bound at all," I said. Speech felt out of my control, as did my body. This was how I usually felt after sex. I indicated my tiny chest, although I knew she wouldn't look. "If I had, like, physical evidence, that would make it a *real* problem."

Anna snorted. She nodded, shook her head, kept smiling in a way that didn't look right. The consequences of our exchange were becoming apparent to her. Anna was too used to and fond of men like me to admit that I had hurt when she had not. She probably wished I hadn't had a response to her story.

I kept talking, poisoning the air in the room almost on purpose. "Because then God could actually get me. Not in-person, I'd stopped believing He could do that, I'd waited for Him to show up so many times and help. When I got sick of waiting, that was when I figured it out. But I was still like, 'Fuck, if I buy equipment or anything, then I'll really be one of them and I won't get to go to the New World!' Which means I would die."

I waited to see if Anna would say anything. Her mouth was mutely open, still smiling. She was acting like this was a funny story. Probably due to the tone I used to tell it.

“So buying a binder or anything would’ve meant I would die. And stay dead, I mean,” I clarified. Several seconds elapsed where Anna looked into my eyes so hard no one could ever accuse her of being uncomfortable. She was so practiced in her own deniability. My chest stung dully. I added, “So I didn’t.”

It was late and prematurely warm and raining. The snow turned to grey and black slurry that splashed up over the top of my boots. I owned two pairs of boots, a men’s pair and a women’s. These were the women’s, which went further up my ankles. They were red, even in the dark. The rain went cold as it soaked into the shoulders of my suit jacket. Used to be Matt’s. I hadn’t asked anybody for clothes. The first day I worked with the three other men, I had explained to them what I was in the simplest terms I could put it. I didn’t want anyone to have to find out later. If I was in danger, I wanted to know immediately. It would be easiest to escape on the first day. Ben would be happy to fire me. My body was always waiting for me to tell it to run, burn its reserves like firecrackers. I could be really quick when I needed to.

We all stood in the parking lot when I told them. We were smoking. I almost didn’t; I rarely smoked in front of adults. But anyone who would have told me to stop smoking was gone by now, or I was gone from them, so I did. My hands shook badly. This was at the old site, luxury apartments. Our shift hadn’t started yet and it wasn’t quite light out. The sky was a cold, eye-straining pink over the mountains. That’s where I looked when I spoke. Jorge asked some follow up questions right away, wanting to clarify if I was a boy or a girl, approximately. Boy, I explained. Tommy tapped one big boot against the other. Matt said, “Alright,” and nodded at all three of us. We nodded back. He asked my name again. “Sawyer, Sawyer,” he announced, and asked to make sure he knew Tommy and Jorge’s names, too.

It didn't come up again explicitly. A few weeks later Matt offered me the attic and the mattress and blankets his mom stored up there. My rent was barely anything, a formality. A few days after I moved in, I helped Matt carry a few trash bags of old clothes up to the attic. "I was smaller, much smaller," he told me. "In high school. Before I wanted to bulk up." I watched the wide stretch of his shoulders move as he carried. He left me sitting on the floor, folding shirts and jackets to line up against the wall, leaving the pants in a pile until I found a belt at the bottom of one of the bags. I pierced a new hole in the leather with a ballpoint pen.

The belt kept my pants up as they got heavy with rain. I hadn't cuffed them, and I felt the hems dragging through the semisolid puddles. Anna had offered to drive me home, but I didn't want her to see where I lived. Not dangerous, I just didn't want to. I hoped she didn't want to know. Anna was the closest I could get to someone like myself. I couldn't yet quit my desperation for her. I liked walking anyway. I wanted to pull my body home even when it was heavy with drink. Night air was a way of bringing feeling back into my body, at least enough so I could change into dry clothes in the dark.

"Ben wants you to manage some new hires today."

"What?" I couldn't make sense of that. Ben had never put me in charge of anything he thought was important. I stood with one of my feet still in Matt's girlfriend's car.

Jorge stuffed his gloved hands into his coat pockets. It was cold like that. "It won't be too bad. Just training them, telling them what happens with what. Just until they know what they are doing." He nodded to the air above my head. "Then you'll probably come back with us again."

I shut the car door and waved to Sydney through the window. “How many?” I asked Jorge.

“Don’t know. A lot. He thought we were really understaffed, so.”

“Were we?”

Jorge shrugged. “They’re over in there,” he said, indicating one of the houses with his elbow.

I cleared my throat. “Do you know if—are they from the church? Ben’s church.” I could see myself walking into a house full of women I knew. I could see their faces turn when I spoke. It could’ve been anyone in there, so it could’ve been them.

“Don’t think so.” Jorge shrugged again. “They’re young. High school, maybe.”

I’m young. “Okay. he wants me to go now?”

“Mhm. Don’t worry, You’ve got it.”

Jorge pulled a hand out of his pocket to slap my shoulder blade through my coat as I walked by. I heard Ben call him and he turned away from me. I didn’t look at Ben. I looked for Tommy, but didn’t find him. Matt was smoking on the curb with Sydney, the two front doors of her car open and radiating classical music and a faint heat. They each gave me a little wave.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling and started over to the house, crunching frozen dirt under my boots, men’s ones. I passed Ben. I let myself look once. It didn’t hurt like it hurt to look at anyone else I knew from church. I was aware of the quiet, invincible anger I’d started feeling about him as soon as I was kicked out. He’d already seen me when I was talking with Jorge, so he knew to look away. He wouldn’t meet my eyes. He couldn’t. But looking at Ben was satisfying. He looked scared. I knew why. It really could be anyone you knew, etcetera. My whole life, the adults had loved me. Even when my mother found out about the first girl they

all loved me. I had just made a mistake. I hadn't known any better. That's probably why I can't quite remember kissing the girl, only how it felt. But I'd changed fast. The things I did became deliberate, which meant they were frightening. Before, I'd never gotten to see Ben scared, never gotten to see the muscles in his face twist like that. He'd always been the person to make those muscles twist in other people's faces. When he made someone afraid, it fed something in him. Now I made him afraid, and that fed something in me and I felt better.

There were about ten of them, all boys, in various poses of relaxation on the first floor of the empty house. Two of the boys had pill-sized speakers sitting at their hips, playing music at the same time. One played Twenty-One Pilots. The other played something techno that might have been a video game soundtrack. The boys did not seem to find the noises dissonant. I wondered if they could listen to both songs at once, or if they could tune one of the speakers out at will, and so choose which beat to slightly nod their heads along to. A few of them looked up at me and one of them stood. "Hey," he said, loud but unthreatening.

I didn't know how to react. I didn't. I stood still.

"Are you the boss?"

I cringed. Ben didn't want me to be a manager because he respected me. He knew I would have to reveal my voice to them. But as I opened my mouth another boy pointed and called, "Sawyer?"

I nodded.

The standing boy nodded back and said, "I'm going to need next week off."

This proclamation amazed and threatened me so profoundly that I began speaking without realizing it. "I'm—I'm just training you today, I don't—"

"S'not the boss," the second boy said in a deep and lazy voice.

“Correct,” I exhaled.

The first boy looked confused. The second boy said, slower, “He’s not the boss, Trav. That other guy is. Ben.”

“He’s old.”

“Yeah, he’s old.”

The first boy sat back down.

“No,” I said, and then “Hi, guys.”

The boys were silent but a few of them waved. They had no visible reaction to my voice, or to me at all. Many were looking at their phones. A few were talking to each other.

“Hi,” I said again. The boys shushed each other. “I’m Sawyer.”

One boy nodded. My name still felt foreign in my throat. I hadn’t changed it, but my voice had changed around it. “So I’ll be showing you the ropes, answering any questions you have.” No one said anything. I added, “About painting.”

No one said anything. I counted them. Nine. They were wearing clothes you shouldn’t paint in. Clean, brand-name hoodies and joggers in tan and mustard and green, bright orange Carhartt knit caps, sneakers that didn’t look old. *Why d’you wear that?* I cleared my throat weakly. “Okay, ready to get started?”

No one said anything. So I said, “Let’s get up.”

Standing was arduous. Then there was finding their tools, which had been improbably lost in the short piece of morning the boys had spent in the empty house. I kept glancing into corners for brushes or a real adult. When I started telling the boys what to do, they looked at me as though there were a glass wall of an enclosure between us. I didn’t know what side I was on. I

handed out rolls of green tape and waited for questions. Mostly there were none, until somebody, who might have been the first boy but I wasn't sure, asked, "Then what?"

I looked at the rollers and brushes lined up against the wall opposite me. I looked at the boy. Then I pointed at the brushes. Immediately, the boy who had spoken picked up a brush and asked, "Where's the paint?"

I looked at the can resting against the boy's ankle. He followed my gaze and reached for the lid. I stopped him with my hands outstretched, explaining that we weren't actually ready to paint yet. He froze in a crouch and waited for more instructions. I told him to stand up.

The shift trickled. It wasn't like working with Matt and Tommy and Jorge. With them, I had to pay attention to about one fourth of the job. In the house with the boys in it, I was the only competent person. They seemed to lack skills that I thought of as basic, like problem-solving and object permanence. As I walked them through the same steps multiple times, I tried to think generously about the boys. Maybe they were good at something else. They were not good at this. But they were kind to me: they weren't anything like me, but they looked at and spoke to me in a respectful way, like there wasn't anything wrong with me.

I let the boys tumble out of the house first when we were finished. We'd needed to redo a few parts, and hadn't made much progress overall. I was exhausted, but I wasn't worried. Ben couldn't blame me in a way that mattered.

I went looking for Sydney's car, worried it had left without me. Tommy ran up behind me, boots landing heavily to get my attention. He motioned to Jorge's truck. Jorge and Matt were standing next to it, vaguely looking at me and Tommy. Tommy said, "We're all going to Jorge's, you coming?"

I'd planned on texting Anna on the way to Matt's mom's house to ask if I could see her, and then when I should see her. I hadn't seen her all week, and it was Saturday afternoon. She hadn't reached out to me, she didn't do that. Instead, I took my phone out to text her that I couldn't come over. Then I remembered we hadn't actually scheduled anything. I put it away again and followed Tommy to the truck.

We climbed in the back and Matt got in the front. Jorge started driving and lit a cigarette, cracking all the windows and letting in slivers of cold air. The sky was a smooth white. Nothing even looked warm. I slipped my hands under my legs. Tommy half-crouched and reached over the console to turn up the radio. The intro jingle for the classic rock station bludgeoned us into our seats and Jorge smacked Tommy on the head. He squirmed back into his seat, grinning.

We stayed comfortably silent while the truck shunted us to Jorge's place, a blue duplex with the skeletons of a few small shrubs out front. I'd never been here, or even thought that Jorge might live somewhere. I could see Matt's life after he left work, and I could guess at Tommy's, but not Jorge's. Jorge swung the door to the downstairs unit grandly open and held it while we went inside.

The apartment was sparse but warm. Jorge sat us on the couches in the living room, Tommy sharing mine, Matt in the one on my other side. Looking around, I put together that Jorge lived alone and didn't mind it. The walls were mostly bare, with a few pieces of landscape art and a poster of a stylized map of Guadalajara with the roads marked out in pastel orange. The surfaces were clean. There was a black and white rug under the coffee table that seemed like it was frequently vacuumed. It looked like the home of a man who cared for himself, and this made something in my stomach cramp up. I looked up at the television, where I could just make out my reflection in the dark screen. It made me shrink a little. I felt sure that if the men saw my

reflection they would see what I really looked like and they would stop being nice to me. They already knew. I felt like I was conning them anyway. I looked away.

Tommy plucked the remote off the table and flicked the TV on. I forced myself to unknit my fingers and rest my hands on my knees. I was safe. No one spoke.

Jorge came in from the kitchen and distributed uncapped beers. Matt thanked him and I drank, hyperaware of the angles of my arms, back, and neck. Jorge said, “Something going on, Tommy?”

I turned my head. Tommy was looking down at his phone and chewing his lip. Reminded, I pulled my phone partway out of my pocket. Anna hadn’t texted me. There was no reason for her to. I set my phone screen-down next to me and watched Tommy scroll up and down a screen of long, unpunctuated texts. He blinked hard. “My wife.”

“Ex-wife,” I said for no reason. I opened my mouth to apologize, but Tommy nodded. Matt crossed one leg over the other and leaned toward Tommy. “She texting you again?”

Tommy nodded and raised his eyes to a muted women’s basketball game. The players swarmed across the court in a way I didn’t understand. “All day.”

“Shit.” Jorge sat on the couch in the space between me and Tommy that I didn’t realize could fit another person. The couch bended under him in a way that required me to do an awkward little scramble to stay upright and not touching anyone. “What’s she saying?”

“Same things.” Tommy wagged his phone a little and rubbed at one of his eyes. “Says she already knows where I’m at and shit, which is bullshit and probably not true.” His voice raised a little here, but he wasn’t angry. Just scared. “Says I better not do anything that’d make her act on that information, make her want to.” I knew the words he stressed were hers. I remember

cringing when Tommy first called his wife crazy in front of me. That was just something men said about women. Men had said it about me. But Tommy was scared, and sad, and sorry.

Matt clicked his tongue and leaned back. "I'm sorry, man."

"Yeah," I said, my voice too scratchy to be quite audible.

Jorge poked Tommy with his elbow. Tommy smiled. He stood to wedge his phone into his back pocket and then sat down again. Jorge said, "You're right, anyway. She probably doesn't know. She's lying. Bullshit."

"Even if she does know." Matt said this like a truism and tilted his beer toward Tommy. Jorge nodded at me. Guessing, I nodded at Tommy.

"Even if she does," Jorge said.

Tommy sat up and took in a deep breath. "Well, anyway."

We all leaned away at Tommy's conclusion. He was grateful, I could tell. Jorge said, "Sawyer, new hires?"

"Oh." I remembered all at once that I was the same person this morning that I was now. "They were fine."

"Tell us what happened," Matt said, peeling the label off his bottle, smiling a little.

I began to. Because they weren't fine, the boys. They were strange, and they were terrible, and this was funny. The men laughed when I told them about how the boys couldn't and wouldn't do anything. Suddenly it was not all a bad or annoying thing, because I could make the men laugh. Three of them, four of us. I let myself be near enough to be one of them. *Us*. I didn't mean to. I was grateful. I told them about the two speakers and Matt asked who Twenty-One Pilots were. I checked my phone four times. Anna did not text me. After the fourth time, I forgot.

I knew I wouldn't remember everything the men said around me, but I wanted to remember their voices. I shut my eyes hard and opened them again. I listened.

“Can I ask you a question?”

I almost didn't register that Anna was talking to me. We were in her bed. Anna was curled with her head on my chest. Uncomfortable on my ribs, but I didn't say so. “Sure, what?”

“You hesitated.” She wasn't teasing. She didn't move. Her affection was always pragmatic and straightforward. She performed a pose and stayed in it. I was alright with that. I'd spent a lot of time with Tommy and Matt and Jorge the past few weeks, not with her. She didn't seem to mind, and I wondered if I did.

I coughed. “Sorry. Zoned out. Here now. What's your question?”

“Are you seeing anyone else right now?”

“No,” I said. I felt relieved. At first, I tried to see several people, trying to have more to hold onto. Maybe Anna had been jealous. Maybe that could feel like it made sense. I kept my voice neutral. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.”

I could tell this was true. “What about you?”

“Me? Yeah. Met a new guy last week.”

“Yeah?” I made my mouth smile even though she couldn't see me. I tried to picture another boy like me. Maybe we could meet. “What's he like?”:

“He’s nice. Works downtown. I don’t remember what company. But I’ve seen pictures of his office. It’s got these beautiful windows, I think it must be up in a skyscraper.”

“Pictures of his office?”

Anna shifted slightly and her skull ground at my collarbone. “I asked to see them.”

Why? A man like me in an office he has pictures of. Liam had been a post office clerk. Then an alternative occurred to me. Almost joking, I asked, “Trans?”

“No, actually.” A microscopic amount of time passed. “Yeah, I thought I’d try, you know? I like him a lot.”

I felt something cold shut itself around my chest and tighten each time my heart beat. *Oh.* “He sounds really nice.” *Oh.* “What’s his name?”

Anna told me but I didn’t hear her. Then she started talking about something else and I didn’t hear that either, but I heard my mouth moving which must have meant that I was also talking. Then I realized that I was on my back and she was sitting on my hips and I think she was still talking. I was remembering the first girl again, but that wasn’t what was happening, because Anna smelled nice, and the first girl had smelled sweet like fruit-rot, especially under her arms. I wondered if no one had bought her deodorant yet. Nobody had told her it was wrong to climb out of her long dresses and contribute to the air around her like that. She just didn’t know the smell was bad. I opened my eyes as Anna kissed me to make sure. I could tell Anna was not the first girl because Anna had her eyes closed and the first girl never did.

I knew what jealousy felt like and I knew I was feeling something other than it. I didn’t want more of Anna’s attention. I wanted less. I wanted to leave but I couldn’t get up. Anna had pulled my jeans and boxers down off my ankles. I heard the inside-out thud of them on the floor. She pushed my shirt up to show my belly and then stopped and crawled down away from it. My

body did its best to feel her close her mouth around it. I tried to say something but I couldn't get the air in me to make a sound. I couldn't pretend she was another person. She was not another person.

And then I was over her sink again, eating something cold out of a jar. Anna was on the counter, legs crossed and dangling, smiling down at me. I swallowed everything out of my mouth and realized I was eating one of those layer cakes you make in a jar, soggy and sticky with syrup. I set the jar down at Anna's hip. She was speaking and I made out a question in reverse as I trickled back into my own skull: "—still in charge of those high school kids?"

"I told you that?" I was bad at recording the feedback Anna gave me when I told her something.

"Yeah. How are they?" She was looking at me seriously now.

"Incompetent and lazy and have never worked before," I said. "Still."

She nodded. "But how are they, you know? I know they're not from your church, but."

It took me seconds to put together what she said. Then I laughed, because it was obvious what she meant and I felt stupid for not having noticed. She wanted to protect me, to keep me *safe* from anyone who might make me feel lesser for what I was. She wanted me to feel like *exactly* what I was, what she saw when she looked at me. She could *tell*, no matter what I wore. And then I was putting on my shoes, not boots. They were faded purple and gray sneakers. I thought maybe the shoes I was putting on made me look like someone who would never be safe while buying new shoes, or doing anything at all, without a guardian angel. I imagined Anna hovering behind me while I painted the walls of new homes, making sure everything was alright.

"—nice to you?"

“Yes, they are all nice to me. I have no complaints.” I stood. “I could be paid more, I guess.”

Anna smiled at me, warmly, as though she were reflecting gratitude. I grinned back as ugly as I could, stretching my mouth too wide. I kissed her on the cheek.

And then I was walking home again. It was windy enough to make the backs of my hands sting when I forgot to put them in my pockets. I was walking loudly on purpose, like I was trying to wake everyone sleeping in the houses I passed with the soles of my boots. I saw Anna’s smile in the shapes the air made in front of me. *Come back soon!* She would never exile me, because she wanted to be *all I had*. She would never be the person to forsake me.

I slowed down. I really could go back, even now. Something in my brain took pleasure in simulating my return, my begging to stay anywhere, even the floor, so long as I was within the walls of her apartment. Not because it was safer there, but because one of us would have what we wanted, not even her. I wasn’t Liam. I wasn’t anyone she knew.

I sat on the back deck of Matt’s mom’s house and smoked. The sky was late-night purple, overcast. I tried to make my brain think, but it seemed to have run dry. I couldn’t make myself feel better, but I also couldn’t make myself feel worse. I positioned my elbows on my knees. I wanted to fill up the air just around my body.

The door to the kitchen opened. I felt Matt’s footsteps on the deck. I closed my eyes with my fingers like I was a dead body. It’s a gesture designed to make me feel better when something is about to happen to me.

“C’mon inside.” Matt’s voice was quiet and even. “Sit in here with me.”

“Why?” I looked up at him and folded my legs under me, readying.

“You don’t look good. Look scared.” He hooked his thumbs into his pockets and stood taller. “And why not?”

I put out my cigarette and pocketed what was left of it. I followed Matt in, cautiously convincing myself of my own safety. Matt poured something into a mug with a flower on it and placed the mug on the table in front of an empty stool. I sat. Matt put the bottle down. It was rosé. I placed my hands flat on the table and tried to will the numbness out of them.

“Were you with that girl?”

“Anna,” I said, watching Matt’s face for anger or impatience or something like that. Maybe he had been waiting for me to come home and maybe now he was annoyed. But he looked fine. He didn’t even look tired. “Yeah, I was with her.”

“She the reason you’re—?” Matt gestures at my face with his own which was in a glass.

“Yeah, it’s like—” I tried to calculate what I was feeling, then which parts Matt would understand, and then which parts I should tell him. Matt looked away politely, but leaned forward on his elbows. So he could catch what I said, even if I was quiet. Something about this amazed me. Even after I figured out what I was going to say, I stayed quiet for a few seconds longer, just to test it, to see if Matt would break away from me and take everyone else with him. But he waited instead. This broke the ice covering my chest. Heat flooded in, so much that I tugged my collar up just in case the skin on my neck blushed, and I was able to take a full breath before I spoke. “I don’t think I should see her anymore.”

Matt nodded. My eyes stung and watered over. “And I don’t know what’ll happen if I don’t go back.”

Matt nodded again. I swallowed half the wine in my mug. Maybe Matt would think I was lying. But he didn’t seem to. He said, “What’ll happen if you don’t go back.”

“Yeah. I don’t know.” I pushed my eyes shut with my fingers again.

“You think she’ll come after you or something?”

“No, no, it’s not like that. She doesn’t like me like that.” Matt made a face. I added, “Which is fine, it’s what we agreed to.”

“Agreed to.” I feel Matt looking at me, face almost expressionless, slightly incredulous and calculating. He told me to come stay with him and his mom with that face.

She didn’t have to like me much, just want me a little and know what I am. I opened my mouth to explain this to Matt and closed it again. I thought agreeing was enough. I looked at Matt, who scratched at his neck and waited. It wasn’t. He looked away again, politely. I didn’t mean to, but I said, “It was just something I had.”

“You and Anna.”

I nodded. Matt sighed to introduce our silence.

Long ago, the first girl had stopped coming over to my house because she had turned herself in. She stopped talking to me because her family moved away. That is what happened. That is what I remember happening. There was another part, too, a shut room full of men. Sitting at the kitchen table with Matt, I couldn’t remember what those men said. But I remembered leaving the room. The meeting had gone on for hours and the sun was setting. There was a dizzying free feeling in my chest because I knew I would come back. I knew I would turn myself in next time, just like the girl who smelled like rot, the one who wanted it all to be over and asked the elders to make it so. But I wouldn’t do that until I knew what I was. In the parking lot, waiting for my sister to pick me up, I had forgotten everything and looked at the world through the sunbeams at an angle. If I looked just right, I could see what the earth would look like if there

was nothing wrong with what I had done. That's what the earth looked like those four weeks. Like I wasn't doing anything wrong.

I drank another mouthful to make my mouth work before I spoke. "Nothing will happen."

Matt nodded. "I don't think it will, yeah."

The air in front of me cleared. I blinked several times. Matt held my gaze for a few seconds, longer than normal. He was serious. For no reason, he wanted to protect me.

I ground my teeth once. There was a reason, which was that I was a person. Matt drank, set his cup down, and looked at me again. Holding me in my personhood. I sat up straighter. Matt smiled.

Then I asked, "Why are you up? We work tomorrow." I was still managing the boys, who hadn't learned anything and didn't remember my name. One of them always offered me cinnamon gum, no matter how many times I declined.

Matt grinned. "I'll be asleep soon. I was watching really old movies with Sydney." He said it like he had gotten away with something by spending time with someone he loved. I smiled back and saw that nothing bad would happen to me because of Matt either, that he was tired and sweet like I was, like the four of us were when we got done painting houses and lent each other our company. I looked around at the kitchen I had ended up in. I hadn't meant to end up anywhere. I knew I was going to die and had assumed it would happen pretty instantly after my childhood ended and my life crumbled apart. But it had been months. My body had simply continued and I was attached to it. I wasn't invulnerable. I was ordinary.

I sat in the kitchen and slowly came to understand that it was alright for me to do so. I asked Matt what he and Sydney had watched, and he told me like there was nothing wrong with me.

Ben stopped coming to the Nova Village site. He just had other sites to work at, including an office building where he had taken the high school boys after he had finally decided that their sloppy work was better suited there than on the walls (and floors) of the flashy eco-homes. A friend of Ben's, a supervisor, would come by every few mornings to check on us. But there was no one left at the worksite now for me to fear.

I sat on the stoop of one of the almost-done houses, eating a warm sandwich wrapped in foil that Sydney packed for me. Egg, sausage, cheese, and soft toast, soaking up the moisture from inside and turning soggy in my hands. It was really good. I was eating alone, so that I wouldn't have to try to hold a conversation at the same time. We were still waiting for Tommy to get here. Matt and Jorge stood facing the little parking lot, backs to me, smoking, not saying anything.

I watched their backs. I could almost make out the rising and falling of their breaths, the small stretches of their muscles as the men acclimated to being awake, alive, here. *Us.* Jorge rolled his shoulders up and back, like he was about to have his picture taken. Matt twisted slightly to one side, then the other. Their backs suddenly straightened, like animals guarding a warren, and I felt my back do the same as Tommy pulled up. *Finally.* Something like relief. We didn't have to wait for Tommy to get here to start working. But we did.

Author's Note

In writing *Sawyer*, my intention was to illustrate the way the people around us can function as mirrors as we approach an understanding of ourselves. I don't just mean the people we look like already, other trans and GNC people on our same trajectory. Hardly anybody has the same trajectory, in gender or otherwise. One is able to see oneself in the kind of people one wants to become, the kind of people one used to be like, and even kinds of people with whom one has little to nothing in common. When someone looks at me, in seeing them, I am *also* looking at me, no matter who that person is. The people around us are a hall of mirrors, and among them we can find ourselves. But, crucially, the mirrors can also speak to us, accept us, and give us directions should we get lost. *Sawyer* also seeks to address related questions, like: How do you know if someone is looking at you as though you are really a person? And how do you become willing to be seen again after great loss?

This story is dedicated to Shady Grove Balcom.

Entry I for the Photography of Jess T. Dugan

Self Portrait (muscle shirt) (2013) (object: photograph)

Haven't I seen you before? I'm lying to myself. I'm pretending to try to place a stranger. Grey light catches on the pale scar, the rough line under the left nipple and trickling out to the armpit. The scar is faint enough in this light that it looks temporary. It looks like an impression left in skin from barely-tight clothes. The scar on the other side of the chest is not visible, but I know it's there. I know what this looks like, the two excavations to make a body livable, or more normal, or less. *Why stand like this then, with the cuts in the flesh showing, the evidence? The evidence of a timeline of metamorphosis, that there was a time before you looked this way?* Arms piled on top of their head, hips cocked, their lips barely showing a few front teeth, not smiling. Almost annoyed, familiar. I grin to myself.

But then I stop. I have something intrinsic in common with the person in the picture, the person who captured their own body like this. We have both spent much time building bridges to our bodies. We even utilize similar materials: appropriated masculinity, the company of our loved ones and people we don't know, blue jeans. In broader strokes, I even have something intrinsic in common with the other captured people, the ones in the other photographs. Being in the presence of these photographs makes me feel like I am in a hall of mirrors, with the mirrors reflecting each other and themselves. I can pick out my outline, but only if I'm looking for it. For the most part, the people are looking at the camera. They don't look sad. I realize that when I look at them, I feel *seen* back. Being seen always feels uncomfortable. I'd rather be undefined (wouldn't you?). I notice that I feel something else. I'm not sad or cautious when I look, and this feels uncomfortable too. But I make myself keep looking, and it is easy, sort of.

Lee Anne, 64, McClellanville, SC, 2016 (object: photograph and interview)

Lee Anne's nails are painted blue. She's outside, suspended in the rich green South Carolina air, heavy to breathe. A body of water drifts along itself behind her, blooming with insects and other life where it touches the air and coaxing new plants to grow up from its borders. Lee Anne stands with her hand on her hip, her head tilted, draped in a colorful shawl. She is looking at the camera with two expressions at once, or maybe more, face arranged to convey a precise message that I try to read and can't, not all the way. Concerned, loving. Dignified? *You don't have to be good*, I want to tell her. She knows already. *You don't have to be good*, I tell myself quietly, without really listening. It's a love story, the one she tells, about a schoolteacher who married her. Sometimes it doesn't matter what you are, you will love the person anyway. Most people don't get to learn that, but some of them do. I think they are very lucky. But Lee Anne is also telling a story about needing to work, which meant she had to keep her hair short and wear clothes that made her the wrong shape. She says she was not good then. It got bad, and she would upset the schoolteacher. (Imagine the schoolteacher looking: *That's not really—*) You cannot tell such a fundamental lie about yourself forever. You cannot become someone else by way of excessive panic and sacrifice, or at all. If you could, maybe, none of us would be here. "I can't do this any more. I cannot live this life. I cannot be like this anymore." There is always a price, but it isn't always your life. Lee Anne's hair is grey and pretty, full of air. I imagine a lover, the schoolteacher, pushing that hair back out of her face. The schoolteacher has never loved any other women like this: sometimes that doesn't matter, if you are lucky. They live in a house with a pond together. They live in this green little world where the air is thick with water. By the time of the photograph, they've been married for nineteen years.

I don't remember anything that happened nineteen years ago.

(Less.)

I remember trying to become someone else. I have always known to try to. *So has she*, I think. I think it's hard enough to feel like knowing it. I have something very broadly in common with Lee Anne. When I keep my attention on this capture, it looks back. Or she does.

(I can swallow that air from here. I can swim. Once, a long time ago, I walked into that air and came out of it, only I don't think I was called the right thing then.)

Jamie (pool) (2017) (object: photograph)

Up close (but not really. Where are you?) the constellations of water droplets are rigid and sharp as glass. Or maybe it is just that they are held still. Jamie's chest looks like a moth held up to the light. Ribs like a web of veins threading through each wing. (Do you carry blood? Or just hold the skin in its shape?) Jamie's face is soft and the two scars are hard. They are red little tracks, puckered and barely sunken into the skin. Jamie is outside, naked. Waiting for something. Waiting to have a picture taken. The face is patient. The lip of the pool conceals everything below the crests of the pelvis. Not coy, but resting against something, controlled. *Masculine*, I decide, pretending I have any evidence for this. Then I take it back. I want to know what it is that draws this person and me together, some kind of together, and I want to name it, and I stop myself from naming anything that isn't mine, again. Jamie's small, soft stomach rests on the edge of the pool, barely, a gentle shape. The trees in the background are blackout-thick with leaves, which makes me feel safer, safer about Jamie, and about me, for looking. Sometimes I think I try not to look at people like me, because knowing anything at all feels invasive. But I feel invited here. I feel isolated, like Jamie. I feel like Jamie is isolated. I don't know who made the cuts that left the red scars. I can make guesses about why they are there. And I feel ashamed

of guessing, only because I could be wrong, only because I tell myself it is wrong to look at a body and *want to know*.

I think of a friend of mine pulling their breasts apart to their armpits with their hands to make their chest look right in front of a bathroom mirror. A permanently unseen gesture.

(Click.)

Except I can see it because I can feel the gesture in my own body. It lives here too, the act of pushing and pulling the body like clay, cursing it for not holding the shape you asked it to. The body can't change like that. There's too much water, it's too heavy. Eventually, at the end of the ritual, you turn away from the mirror again. But you remember.

Recall Drift

Ahead of Auri is a path walled on either side by trees thick with leaves just beginning to color. Some glow gold-green, others are becoming red. There's something alien about the colors, or the way they meld, but Auri decides they like that about them. The path is straight, leads up a small hill and over it, down to a body of water on the other side, the surface calm and soft like grey suede. Auri knows this, although they don't know how they know this yet. They listen for the sound of the wind moving through the branches, but can only hear a low, mechanical drone, which sounds like it is coming from their own brain, and not anything around them. Their eyes shut, and they hesitate, as though reluctant to wake up from a dream where they feel safe. Then they fall toward the sound.

“Good morning, Auri.”

They roll their head to the side and open their eyes. The first thing that comes into focus is the little plastic travel aquarium on the small desk affixed to the wall. Auri remembers how it felt to carry the aquarium down the hallway, the little orange and black and purple body of the fish inside tumbling against the plastic walls. The fish is very good news, even if the situation is temporary. Staff caught the fish in the act of eating another fish and had quickly extracted it from the big tank next to the kitchen. The fish company had just announced they would be closed for the next three weeks, so Auri asked if they could keep the fish in their room. Nobody could find a concrete reason to deny them. They hadn't done anything wrong all week, or day. Long enough. Auri watches the fish squirm its body around to face the center of the room.

Their Research and Treatment Team is here, standing over the bed. This is so Dr. Christmas can meet her requirement for organizing a full Team meeting as early in the day as possible. She stands at the head of the bed by the left side of Auri's face, cooling the air with her

practiced smile. The rest of the Team is slightly fanned out around the small and mostly empty room, some looking at Auri, a few looking at the drawings stuck up on the walls with tape. The Team, which has changed its composition constantly since Auri was first sent here after being committed to a smaller facility, is supposed to help run the experiments Auri is a part of, as well as Auri's treatment for various mood disorder diagnoses. Auri is not sure the Team is particularly helpful with either. The droning noise is coming from a big square cart, a kind of mobile lab, operated by a nurse standing at Auri's hip. "Vitals," Dr. Christmas says. "Sorry to wake you, I didn't want you to oversleep and your cycle to get all messed up. How are you feeling today?"

"Fine." Auri sits and swings their legs over the side of the bed. They present their arm and face and throat to the nurse and then tune out the nurse's sounds and movements. The air is full of sour coffee-smell from the mouths of the Team members, and it makes Auri feel a little sick. They peer up through it at Dr. Christmas, who types something on a tablet in a sturdy plastic case. "What time is it?"

She glances down at Auri, managing to only look a little uncomfortable. "I don't know."

"You don't know."

She turns away, still typing, and moves toward the door. "Are you still up to testing this morning? Just the one." She sounds apologetic, even if it's only for her own sake.

A young Team member with a scraggly black beard in a net sets a folded set of Auri's clothes on the bed. Tunic, undershirt, briefs, pants, provided by the hospital in colors chosen by Auri, who won't move to touch the clothes until they are alone again. "Sure."

"Fantastic. Come on out when you feel ready." She gives Auri a final small smile and then pushes out of the room. The rest of the Team trickle out after her, the nurse pulling the heavy cart out last. No one closes the door.

So Auri does, standing slowly to lessen the inevitable headrush. The door clicks shut softly, and Auri presses their thumb to the place a lock would be on a bedroom door in any other kind of dormitory. The plastic handle is smooth and cold and solid. Then they turn to the window, which is treated to be opaque, only emitting a warm white glow when light hits it. Auri can't see through it. But they stand in the patch of light anyway, imagining the mild day beyond it. They turn their hands over so the light falls into their palms.

In the hallway two men rise from a bench opposite Auri's door and move to flank them. Auri lets this happen, even though they know where they are going. The doors to the testing rooms are identical and the wing is a labyrinth, but their muscles can lead them to whichever room contains the right equipment for the tests to be performed. On days where they don't know what the tests are, they can only guess the room. The two men don't actually know the way, and have to follow Auri. The men have batons and stun guns in their belts. The men are security guards, and each of them is about twice Auri's size. This is for Auri's *safety*. They are not trusted with their own body, in case they might damage it.

This morning's test is on the air around Auri, rather than their body, which means they are free to move and stay standing. Ever since the discovery of post-traumatic temporal fluidity, or what staff are led to understand as the ability to travel *backward* in time (Auri is amazed that anyone can still think of time as a linear progression flowing in one direction, even as their ability disproves this), researchers have been trying to determine how to harness this ability, and what interests it can be harnessed for. Tests are conducted to measure how much of the space immediately around a patient is affected (it depends), the precision with which patients are able to arrive at different times of their lives (it depends), and anything else that could make the ability, technically a *symptom*, useful. Auri, who has a much more developed ability than most

patients, was transferred to where they are because it is the leading institute in the country researching PT-temporal fluidity. All the equipment Auri is tested with is state-of-the-art and completely illegible, since Auri is never told very much more than where to stand, sit, and submit to restraints. They are also told they are very good at moving through time, and that is why they stay here. Auri doesn't quite believe this, but that doesn't matter. They don't have a choice about staying. They don't have anywhere else to go, anyway.

The technicians greet Auri, who waves back once they've moved to their marked-out square of floor where they are supposed to stand. The technicians are familiar, and they are kind, but they do not intervene or seem to think fully for themselves, and so they are unimportant to Auri. The room is lit brightly in the corners, and is nearly dark in the square where Auri stands.

A man at the edge of the square is announcing something into a recorder. "Patient 4475, name *P*—"

"It's Auri." Auri waits for the man to look at them, so they can look back. He stares for a moment and so do they. Then he steps backward toward the other staff, continuing to speak quietly into the recorder. Auri peers around near the bright lights where they guess Dr. Christmas might be. They are excited to be anywhere but now and here.

"Alright, Auri," her voice sounds from their back. They don't turn. "We're ready when you are. Just *go* whenever you—"

Auri tilts their head partway back and shuts their eyes. They fall away from the institute and, unmoored, float. They can tell they are floating by sensations in their stomach and a small headache behind their eyes, which stay shut. Human eyes aren't built to see what it looks like to fall through time. There aren't visuals a human brain can translate into information. Some patients don't mind, and can keep their eyes open anyway, but it gives Auri such bad motion

sickness that they wouldn't do it even if Dr. Christmas demanded it. Which she doesn't, of course. Only when they are still do they open their eyes again.

Auri's head barely clears the counter around the bathroom sink, so they climb up on a bright green stool, little hands on the edge of the counter for balance. They open the medicine cabinet and pull out a small tray of face paints meant to be saved for halloween. With some difficulty, they work the tops off the pots of red, green, brown, and silver paints, and then examine their canvas. In the mirror, their hair is hidden under a Red Sox cap turning pink with age, Father's. Auri's too short, Auri's sister says, and that's why they need to keep a stool around. She says she is going to be just as tall as mother someday, and Auri will not. No one knows how tall Auri is going to be, she says, because no one knows where Auri came from. Auri knows where, because their mother told them: the other side of the ocean. But when they tell her, she says that's not what she means.

Auri pushes their tiny fingers into the paint, but the dense pucks of color barely give. So they turn the faucet on and wet their fingers and rub water into the colors. It was like the watercolor kit they had gotten for their birthday. They begin with green, for *rotting flesh*, smearing it across their neck and cheeks. They imagine a smell like when they forgot to empty their lunchbox after school one Friday, only for Mom to present the moldy remains to them on Monday morning. Sweet, furry on the inside of their nose. Silver next, although they wish it was grey, for the parts of their hands and face that were becoming *dead*. Brown for *dirt*, bright brown. They wipe some at the corners of their mouth like they have eaten it. Red for *blood*, which they paint in a line around their neck, scoop into the insides of their ears, glob under their eyes, designating these as the places they are leaking fresh blood.

Once their face is wet and heavy in a way that feels complete, Auri stops and admires their work. There's paint in the few little black tufts of hair that stuck out of the cap. There's a new smear of paint on their shirt, their favorite one, green with long sleeves, but this doesn't matter. The shirt is not stained, just *changed*. Auri bares their teeth but tries not to smile. They make their eyes and nose scrunched up scary, bend their fingers into claws, still pink with blood. They wish they could be in one of the scary black-and-white movies they'd seen on weekends, a monster now, but Auri would be smart enough to *win*. Smart enough to evade the guys with big guns and get out, get to the woods, probably.

The door clicks open in the mirror. A woman's serious face contorts into horror, and then anger. "P—!"

Auri doesn't move, claws still framing their painted face. Startled out of their body, all Auri's kidvoice manages is, in the tone of a question, "Baseball Zombie?"

And then Auri shuts their eyes and falls again.

"—feel ready and we'll—oh."

Auri opens their eyes again. Around the testing room, technicians and members of the Team are moving, looking at readouts and having conversations that Auri can't make out. They stare at the green EXIT sign over the door, dim against the other lights, to ward off dizziness. Dr. Christmas clears her throat and then speaks again. "Alright, Auri, how are you feeling?"

"Fine."

Dr. Christmas waits, as though Auri will say more. "No motion sickness, or—?"

"Nope." Auri does not turn to face her.

"Great." Dr. Christmas raises her voice cheerily. "Now, how far back did you go?"

This phrasing doesn't make sense to Auri. They have to translate it in their head to fit their understanding of time before replying. "You said it didn't matter where I went this test."

"Yes. It doesn't. But it's data."

Auri spots one of the technicians who is standing just by the door. He's not looking at them. He seems nervous. Auri wonders what the man thinks Auri will do to him. "I was six. Maybe five and a half."

"Great. And was the memory challenging or easy for you?"

Auri pulls their hands into the rough sleeves of their tunic, mint green. Dr. Christmas isn't interested in the specifics of where Auri *went*. If she had been, she could have had Auri take a camera with them. Auri is competent enough by now to transport small objects, as long as those objects remain in contact with their body, and there are kinds of cameras that are very easy to take through time. What Dr. Christmas wants to know is if Auri has experienced any therapeutic improvement, some kind of lesson to make their present existence seem different to them. Auri turns around 180 degrees, approximately facing the doctor, although they can't know for sure. "It was easy. I returned before it would become challenging."

"Okay!" Dr. Christmas raises her voice slightly further. She doesn't have to communicate her disappointment. Auri knows how she feels. "Well, we're just about done here—"

"May I leave?"

She sighs. "Yes. You may return to your room."

Auri waits until a nurse, a young man with a shiny bald head who arrived a few days ago, uses his badge to open the door. He trails them back to their room, although they don't acknowledge him. They prefer his company to the guards. They try gently to close the door to their room with the nurse on the outside of it, but he catches the handle and lets himself in.

“Sorry,” he starts, like he’s going to tell a joke. “Supervision is recommended for fifteen minutes—”

“I know.” Auri figures the man can take their being short with him. The supervision is allegedly to monitor any symptoms or changes in behavior. He sits in a chair in the corner of the sparse room. Auri sits cross-legged on their bed and doesn’t look at him. They begin sketching a pair of hands on a legal pad in marker. The marker is for children, and it is cherry-scented. Auri doesn’t think of their art as skilled, particularly, but that’s not what matters. It feels good to draw.

The nurse coughs and then apologizes for coughing. This reminds Auri to ask him something, because he is new and is probably not aware of all the restrictions placed on Auri based on their behavior. And *progress*. Without looking up, Auri asks, “What time is it?”

They can hear the nurse’s sleeve rustling from across the room as he checks his watch. “Ten thirteen.”

Auri smiles. He is not supposed to talk to them, and Auri is rarely allowed to know the time. The Team decided that Auri was becoming obsessive about the time on clocks. Really, Auri had been using clocks to remember how most people understand time. They would watch the numbers or hands move and try to memorize how it felt for a second to pass. This didn’t help them to empathize with staff, but it made them very good at counting time without a clock. Auri starts counting seconds as they draw. If they concentrate, they can probably count to ten thirty. Or eleven, or eleven thirteen.

A single security guard escorts Auri to the exam room closest to their room, her huge hand clamped tightly on the bicep of Auri's good arm. The other is scraped up shallowly, but in a way where the skin's all ragged and throbbing hot with pain. It isn't a bad injury, but there's enough blood smeared on Auri's uniform and on the laboratory table that no one remembered to chastise Auri for resisting the restraints again. The table was cleaned and the arm was packed in gauze and elevated, all while Auri said nothing. Dr. Christmas didn't ask any questions. Auri felt grateful, even as they heard the impatience in her voice, nodding for someone to get the offending bloodied canvas strap into a hamper somewhere. Mara, a younger Staff member who Auri didn't dislike but wouldn't want to be left alone with, moved quickly, keeping a sour twist in her lips as she rearranged the room.

The guard deposits Auri in the room with another nurse and leaves before anyone can say anything. The nurse doesn't meet Auri's eyes. She is busy with a tray of objects intended for wound treatment. Auri peels a jacket sleeve off their good arm and sits on the exam table, shivering in the chilly office in only their undershirt.

The nurse, who is new here but experienced, opens a package of tape and begins to work on Auri's arm.

Auri recognizes the packaging. They open their mouth, shut it, and open it again. "I am allergic to this."

"It's tape."

"I know."

The nurse continues to wrap the tape around Auri's arm, which is not bleeding hard anymore. Auri tries again, unsure of how to convince her of something that is true. "I'm allergic to it."

“To tape?” Her hands work as though Auri’s arm is a part of a textile she is working on instead of a person.

Auri tries to look into her face, which is tilted down, gently creased in concentration. “This tape. Whenever they put this tape on me, I get hives. I think it’s the adhesive.” Auri thinks of Mara, who would probably put the tape away wordlessly and use something else, constantly projecting with her face how much of an inconvenience it was for her to be on Earth, in this building, with Auri.

This nurse isn’t young, but she isn’t old, either. She moves with the energy of a person who has been moving for a long time. She has worked in many different medical establishments of various kinds, and nothing is distinct from anything else for her. Since socialization with Auri is unimportant to her, she responds as though she can hear Auri, but not what they are saying. She says, “Who’s *they*?”

“What?” Auri waits a beat for clarification and it doesn’t come. “The people who put the tape on me? That’s you, that’s staff.”

She just nods. It’s like she is giving Auri a cognitive test, to see whether they are still capable of basic recall after their injury. No such protocol exists. Auri shakes their head and tries one more time, on principle more than anything. “This tape gives me a rash. Could you please use something else? Anything?”

“Irritation at the wound site,” she declares in a way that terminates Auri’s line of inquiry. She cuts a ribbon of tape with a flourish of finality. “Unfortunately, I can’t make it all go away. There’s going to be some discomfort—”

Auri slouches forward a little. The nurse can just say *no*, but she never will. The fact that her deliberate opacity is not even of any value to the institute or the researchers makes the air in

front of Auri turn precarious. They shut their eyes and fall out of it, aiming in the direction of the event the institute has never tested them on.

Because the researchers tell Auri to navigate by memory, and this is not a memory. The incline stretches Auri's calf muscles taut. They're taking the hill quickly, the one that hides calm grey water. They know about the water. They haven't seen it, but they really, really want to. Cool wind rattles the glossy leaves overhead.

The sound of a branch snapping startles Auri. They freeze for a moment and then start running, strides as long as they could manage, pulling them up the hill. They are too close to the water for someone to take them away again now. They're wearing shoes, that's good, but their muscles were weakened and their lung capacity diminished after—

—after how long? How long have the tests gone on, and the confusing attempts to make them get *better*? Years? Auri can't tell, can't ever tell. They turn back toward the sound.

A branch has fallen onto the path, bare and blackish, dead. It lies at a harmless angle. There is no one around. Auri turns back and falls again, shutting their eyes as they feel the ground and air give out at the same time.

Auri is in their room in the institute, watching the second hand move around the face of a plastic watch (band removed) they have balanced in the palm of their hand. As a relatively recent arrival to the institute, Auri is still in the process of being assigned a Team for their treatment. The current candidate for lead doctor, a pale, severe woman nearly as small as Auri, stands in the doorway to the room. She is saying, "Knowing what I know about you, you're going to be here a long time." Auri doesn't look up, so she adds, "Maybe forever. I don't know." Auri has spent a lot of their sessions with this doctor trying to talk her into using their real name. This has made the doctor resent them, but Auri hasn't stopped trying. They won't. What else is there to do?

Auri closes their fingers around the clock face and shuts their eyes. The space around their body tugs on their skin as the air splits.

The closet smells like old lady's coats. It's so dark that, no matter how far Auri stretches their eyes open, they can't make out any shapes, or even where in the closet they are standing. They reach both their hands out in front of their body slowly and touch a wall. They turn and reach into the dark again and feel the hems of two fleece jackets. Their hangers clack against each other. Auri pulls their hands away fast. The object of the game is not to be found. They are never found. Their sister says it is because everyone forgets about Auri, and the game ends without them every time. Auri thinks it is actually because they are so small that there are too many places to look. Then they get to run out and find everybody at once. Even if nobody finds Auri, that means they get to do the finding. It means that they get to choose when they are seen. On a whim, Auri pulls down a white windbreaker, Mom's, and puts it on. The plasticky coat hangs far away from their body. The sleeves swallow their hands and dangle to their knees. They become formless, a block of plain color, a creature with a changing shape. *Ghost*, Auri thinks, feeling powerful and not very small.

Auri pushes through the coats and out of the closet, barrelling into the dining room. Mom and Dad and their sister and their three cousins all sit at the big dining room table, spread with an elegant cloth for Sunday dinner. Dinner has started already. No one looks up. Maybe everyone did forget. Or maybe Mom got everyone to the table even if they didn't all forget. Auri knows now that they have to get to the table without Mom seeing them, so they raise up off their heels and start gingerly across the room, the windbreaker rustling like robes made of fine reeds. Mom does see them, of course, and Auri shuts their eyes before she can say anything.

Auri shudders with the force of their falling, and then at the cool forest air. But they are alone, and now they feel serene. They continue up the hill at a normal pace. There is no one left to come after Auri anymore. There is no punishment out here, on the outside of everything. Auri revels at the ease with which they know this. It feels unfamiliar and almost lonely. They will find someone else soon. At the top of the hill, they will look out over the water. Then, surely, they will know what to do next.

“Honey? Did you go somewhere?”

Auri opens their eyes and watches the nurse feebly prod at their shoulder, like they are a sleeping dog. Auri draws back a little.

“Oh, honey, how are you feeling? Can you see me?”

“Fine.” Auri glances down at their arm, which seems to be as bandaged as it is going to be. They stand, sidestep the nurse, and head for the door.

“Now, I have to tell your Team if something happens, they asked me to.” The nurse stands in a rustle of paper charts. “Could you please tell me what happened to you just now?”

“Temporal fluidity. It’s in my chart.” Auri opens the door of the exam room.

“Wait! Wait. I’ll tell them it—it’s happened before?” She sounds a little frantic now, all effortless professionalism gone. She doesn’t want to get in trouble. This makes Auri feel pleased.

“Your Team, I’ll tell them. They can send someone by your room later. What’s your name? You’re 4475, your name is—” She flips through her armful of papers.

“My name is Auri. Ask for Auri’s Team.” Auri steps out into the hall, an icy frustration climbing up their throat. They turn to look her in the eyes. “Don’t fuck it up.”

The nurse holds still, staring searchingly at Auri. Indignation starts to creep into her expression and Auri turns and takes off at a brisk walk down the hall, imagining for a moment that they are a Team member on the way to ask a patient redundant and invasive questions.

Then they get to their room and sit on the floor inside with their back against the shut door, which isn't allowed, but no one will find out anyway. The fish floats in their direction from its tiny tank, bumping its nose on the plastic. "Stop it," Auri grumbles under their breath. "You'll be somewhere big enough soon."

It is hard to still believe in something when everyone who has control over your life consistently insists that it isn't true, even if you have some proof that it *is* true. Auri can't believe it all the time, believe that they can do what they can do. Researchers insist that post-traumatic temporal fluidity only works in one "direction." The ability has been explained as originating at memories of trauma, flashbacks made irrefutably tangible, and then spreading to other related and surrounding memories. But the way the researchers explain Auri's ability to Auri, over and over, assumes that time is a line stretching infinitely in both directions, and that the "spreading" works like a splash of ink spreading up and down from the center of a strip of cloth toward the ends. The ability to travel to different events, they suggest, is an extension of a patient's finesse in recall. The ability doesn't actually work that way, two-dimensional spreading. It is more like a light slowly increasing in brightness inside a dark and infinite room. The turns Auri takes, which sometimes feel like they are more a result of wonder and compulsive checking-around than intentional practice of a skill, can be in any direction, toward any wall, corner, or object. They can turn to the floor and the ceiling, find a window and peer out. And they can do this constantly, infinitely, because it doesn't take any time, because it is *within* the time already extant. The only

person truly exhausted by it is Auri. And it is still considered a symptom, or, if they enjoy it, simply a way they try to *cope*.

What this discrepancy in understanding means practically is that the researchers believe going “forward” in time is impossible. Auri has tried to tell staff about the forest, the changing trees, and the water. It is a recent development, this movement. Auri knows instinctively where the forest is in the *room*, in time. They know it is, in the language of the researchers, *in the future*. Dr. Christmas doesn’t say much about it, no matter how many times Auri tries to bring it up, and other staff are defiant or dismissive, sometimes both. It’s not possible, that’s what they mean, according to psychology and psychiatry. According to everything everyone knows about the human brain, walled off into its skull. Because that is where trauma *is* for them, in the meat of the brain, totally separate from the rest of the universe to which the traumatized belong.

Auri is aware, very dimly, that the forest must be a true event. When they are in the forest, they can feel knowledge inside of their head that they don’t have now, in their room at the institute. Slouched against the door, Auri tries as hard as they can to recall the path, where they must have been fifteen or twenty times by now. Why this limited sliver of clairvoyance? Why hadn’t they reached the water yet?

What would it take?

Auri, who’s been idly poking at their bandaged arm, lets their hand fall to the floor with a little thud. What would it take to reach the water? To reach that forest at all? From here?

Falling out of time doesn’t feel like a vision, not even when they go to the forest. It doesn’t even feel like a flashback. They aren’t even scared when it happens, necessarily, and wherever they fall anywhere the world has that sober quality of moments where you know, with certainty, that you are not dreaming. Events that have happened to Auri don’t change when Auri

revisits them, like they would if they were memories. They remain as they happen, as they will always happen. And the forest never changes either. The branch always falls, and Auri always has to calm themselves down. Auri recalls the certainty in their chest, certainty that no one is following them anymore. Actual, unmedical, unmitigated freedom. As it happens, as it happened, as it will happen. This means that, in an amount of time that is impossible to determine, Auri won't be in the institute any longer. They look to the fish, who keeps bumping into the plastic. They look to the window. They wonder how to count the time between now and getting to somewhere else.

Auri spends more and more time in the forest. They never make it especially far. They always end up falling out before they can see the water. But no one follows them there. They've realized that, no matter what measurements or photographs are being taken, their Team can't follow them *anywhere* they fall to. Auri communicates the essential information in the tests, but nothing else. If staff press, Auri doesn't say anything. Silence is disconcerting enough to make almost anyone stop asking.

Auri sits on the floor of their room, by the desk with the fish. It has been a few weeks since the fish company returned from its closure, but no one has come for the fish yet. The fish now swims in a bigger container, a plastic storage bin with holes poked in the top. Whenever someone enters their room to check on them, Auri watches them look surprised that Auri hasn't done something awful to the bin of water, the fish. Auri is drawing the fish now, the fish in a little pond of stretching and contracting shapes that, if you look close, are actually human hands.

Someone knocks and Auri says to come in. It's Dr. Christmas and she has Mara with her. Auri is surprised. They aren't even sure if Mara is still a member of their Team, since she never comes to the morning meetings. Dr. Christmas tugs the chair from the corner of the room and sits in it. Mara stands. Dr. Christmas says, "Shall we?"

Shall we what? "Sure." Auri looks at Mara, who is staring into the blank light from the window.

"As you may somehow already know," Dr. Christmas begins, turning her whole upper body to shoot Mara a look before settling again, "you are under review to be transferred to another Institute, in Colorado."

"I didn't know that." Auri stares straight at Dr. Christmas, who shuffles through charts on her lap, looking for information she already has memorized. "What's the reason this time?" They aren't concerned about this. It won't be the first time someone from the institute has tried to get them transferred back to a state-run facility somewhere, and, like with the fish, no one has ever found an actual reason that Auri shouldn't stay shut up exactly where they are.

"Do you want the long answer or the short answer?"

Dr. Christmas is making herself smile at Auri now. Auri hates it when she does this, tries to pretend she is their friend. They glance up at Mara, who has turned slightly away from Dr. Christmas. "I want to know the reason."

The air between Auri and Mara turns opaque, then comes apart in a way that looks like hands unfolding, fingers fanning open and back. It's pretty, but, knowing better, Auri shuts their eyes.

They blink in the sunshine. It's before the institute, months before. They're on a sidewalk with Callum. Callum is a good friend, larger than Auri in all dimensions, but never in a way that

is frightening. He is speaking: “I think that’s exactly *why* you should apply. They really don’t get that much visual art, but they still give out grants for it. I think you’ve got a good chance.”

Auri grunts and walks a little faster. Callum giggles and jogs to keep up. He’s not very fast. “Not only that,” he huffs, “but I think more people should see your work. It’s really good and beautiful and different, like I keep saying!”

Auri feels their mouth smile. It’s both hard and easy to hear Callum talk about their drawings. He’s always loved them, even when Auri thinks the drawings are not worthy of love. They’re still just doodles. But Auri knows he isn’t lying. His love is genuine. “What about you?” Auri says, as a means to deflect. “Are you going to apply with a poem or something?”

Callum grins. “You know what? I wasn’t planning on it, but I will do it if *you* do it.”

Auri fishes an acorn out of their pocket to chuck at Callum’s shoe. “Fine. Whatever.”

“Whatever indeed!”

Auri can hear Dr. Christmas speaking. They make themselves phase back into their room at the institute, shutting their eyes while Callum still smiles. They open them again and suck in a deep breath.

“—your lack of progress, frankly. We’re not sure there is anything more we can do to help you.” Dr. Christmas frowns deeply, like she’s swallowing something she doesn’t like the taste of.

Auri rolls their eyes. Of the handful of people in the country who had a time ability, Auri knows they’re one of the most precise. They wait.

“I’m not talking about temporal fluidity. I’m talking about your depression.” She scribbles something on a chart. Auri watches the pen move, in strokes too big and constant to be making words. She doesn’t look up as she speaks. “You keep isolating yourself, avoiding staff

and never coming to group therapy. When you *do* speak to us, you don't *tell* us anything. You are dissociating for longer and longer periods of the day."

She's speaking too quickly. And her voice is wrong. Not apologetic, not this time, but definitely uncomfortable. Auri narrows their eyes. *Why is she lying to me?* "And why would going to Colorado help? Mountain air?" They don't manage to bite those last words back in time.

Mara's head suddenly jerks to fix Auri with a glare that isn't stern so much as it is...wild. Auri rumples their brow to communicate confusion, which has no effect.

Dr. Christmas keeps drawing. "Sometimes, when you have tried something for long enough, you have to try something else." She finally clicks the pen shut and stands, looking at/out the window with unbreakable concentration. "I think you should try something else."

Auri watches Mara, who now glares at her own tapping foot. "I think I disagree."

"It doesn't matter," Dr. Christmas says, a little too clipped. She regains her composure. "I'm sorry. But the decision to transfer you isn't just yours. It will also be on the advice of your whole Team."

"Really." Auri looks at her and arranges their face so it is not obvious that they know they are being lied to.

"I only had a minute to stop by this morning. I just wanted to let you know what was going on." Dr. Christmas smiles tightly at Mara, who nods without looking at her. "Mara will take you to this afternoon's test."

Mara fixes her gaze on Auri. "You'll need to change. You wore that uniform yesterday."

"I didn't. All my clothes are green."

"Yes, you did." For just a second, Mara's face changes to a look of pleading. Then it's the glare again. "You have to change."

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions,” Dr. Christmas says, standing. “And your questions will be answered in time. I just wanted to keep you in the loop, for now, as much as I can.”

“Sure. Thanks.” Auri sinks their fingernails into their palms. “Generous of you.”

Dr. Christmas shuts the door behind her. Mara doesn’t move. Auri stands up and opens their mouth, unsure of what degree of anger they should be feeling, but Mara cuts them off quietly. “*Listen* to me and get changed. Could get fired. Fuck.”

Staff are forbidden from talking this way and so don’t. Auri searches Mara’s face a second for any other information and, finding none, presses a button in the wall and requests into a small receiver that another uniform be brought to them. They stand next to Mara, who doesn’t move or speak. Auri doesn’t either until someone comes in with the uniform. Once they are alone with Mara again, they stand behind her, tune out their own body, and begin changing their clothes.

“I could get fired or very hurt,” Mara announces softly.

“I get that. Why?”

Mara walks to the window and then sits cross-legged on the floor. When she doesn’t say anything, Auri follows cautiously, sitting down facing her. Then Mara lets out a breath. “Do you know why you are going to Colorado?”

Auri glances around the empty room once. “No. She was lying.”

“She was lying. It’s not because people here don’t want to deal with you anymore. For whatever it’s worth, I promise you that.” She twists and untwists her fingers in her lap in a way that Auri can’t help but find distracting. “And it’s not an institute like this one. It’s a military research hospital in Colorado Springs.”

Auri snorts. They don't feel surprised or anguished. They just feel frustrated. "My time ability," they say, just to hear how reductive the words sound in their own mouth.

"Obviously." Mara looks up, only for a second.

Auri calculates the implications of measuring the space around their body when they fall, testing which objects they could bring along and which were too big. "So I'll be time-travelling bombs and stuff."

"I don't know. It's not like this place. More physicists and—" Auri hears the sleeve of her scrubs rustle as she makes a dismissive gesture. "Whoever else makes weapons."

"When do I go?"

Mara says nothing. She looks down at Auri with the same pleading expression they saw her wearing earlier. This is unsettling and unhelpful, and Auri repeats themselves. "When do I go, Mara?"

Mara folds her arms. "You can't. You will die."

Auri waits for Mara to give this statement the weight she seems to think it deserves. When several seconds have gone by, Auri says, "I think you and I might have different relationships to death."

Mara glares at them. "Listen. You go there, they will kill you, and they will kill you trying to kill lots of other people. Maybe succeeding." She bends down toward Auri slightly and says, even quieter, "Time travel with the precision you have would be very *good* for them. But that doesn't mean they will keep you alive."

She is waiting for Auri to panic. Auri feels the air sliding apart around them, doors in invisible directions. Auri's eyes must glaze over, because Mara snaps her fingers in front of their face. "You can't let that happen to you. It's not what you *want* from your life."

Auri feels calm. They scoot a little closer to Mara and make sure she is looking into their eyes. “It’s not what I *want*.” Auri lets this hang in the air and looks around. Their empty room, walls covered in drawings of bodies and contraptions manipulated by strings, thick lines where they used washable markers, finer when they were allowed a pen. “That’s your reason? I shouldn’t kill people because it’s not what I want?” They look at Mara again. “What do you think I *want*, Mara?”

They watch Mara calculate and regret. She holds up her hands. “You are right. That was not fair of me to say, and I’m sorry.” This surprises Auri, but she just keeps talking. “But you can’t let them use you. No: they can’t get to you. I know it doesn’t feel possible, but it can’t happen.”

“What do you want me to do?” Auri’s voice breaks and they grind their teeth down around it.

“We’re going down to the test chamber now.” Mara grabs Auri’s wrist and squeezes hard, then pulls her hand back again, quick, like she doesn’t want Auri to see it. “When we start testing, you have to escape. I know you can. I’ll help.”

“But where am I supposed to go?” This has always been the question, but especially now. Auri wants to feel excited, but there’s only a plummeting feeling in their gut.

But Mara just loops an arm over their shoulder and steers them toward the bedroom door. “*Where?*” Auri hisses, planting their feet.

“I have two people waiting for you on the outside. But not for very long. They will tell you where to go.” Mara is stronger than Auri and tugs them back into motion. Auri stops resisting all at once and forms their face into a neutral, tired mask.

Dr. Christmas greets Auri when they enter the testing room. Mara stands at their side like a sentry while she searches Auri's face for reactions to the news about the transfer to Colorado. Then Mara leads Auri into the center of the room. Another free-standing test, unrestrained. Auri whispers, "My fish."

Mara doesn't say anything, but nods after a few seconds.

Auri stands in the taped-out square. They try to visualize what Mara's *people* will look like. What are the chances they'll be able to tell which strangers are waiting for them, which ones will take them away from here and not right back inside? They wish they could have said goodbye to Mara. She's leaving the room, furiously tapping something into her tablet.

Dr. Christmas starts invisibly speaking. Auri notices three men in unfamiliar uniforms standing in a row along one wall. They stare at Auri openly. Auri watches the door to the room open into a hallway-bright rectangle and then they watch the rectangle shrink shut. "Whenever you're ready, Auri," Dr. Christmas calls. The air around Auri loosens.

Then an alarm blares throughout the whole wing. Auri knows this instinctively because of how the walls move. The noise is so loud that technicians bend in half, clutching the silhouettes of their heads at the edge of the room. Bodies look around for other bodies and instructions and make screams of pain that Auri can't hear. The institute has different alarms for different emergencies, like fire and carbon monoxide and patients deemed a threat to someone's safety, and no one can remember which alarms mean what.

Through their shock Auri forces their muscles to work, remembering how to run as they run. They slam through the door down the hallway, gasping for air that hurts their throat as they breathe it. The slap of their plastic shoes, deafening usually, is inaudible now. The air stays loose, pushes them. They see the door Mara opened, ajar in a building where doors are never left that

way. Auri tries to stretch their legs further, swallowing the remaining space, but down the hall another security guard is also running, running toward *them*, and slams the door as he passes it.

Auri stops running and all at once their body aches. Their legs are unsteady and their vision swims, the alarm and chaos blurring in their brain into a dull roar. They can feel the security guard fixing them in his line of sight like prey. They look around for Mara, but there are just more staff who aren't Mara, and some of them were running for Auri. And the guard. And the noise and the air. Auri will be punished steeply for this. And get shipped off even sooner, probably.

But Auri starts running again, toward the guard, who scowls and stands with his arms and legs apart, taking up most of the hallway. Even as they are trying to tune out their pain, Auri's body finds the gap before they do. They duck and shove under the guard's arm and he curses. Auri feels a hysterical giggle in their throat, but forego it in favor of deep, burning breaths. Still, something in them starts laughing.

Auri takes an exit course that, while still pretty direct, is convoluted enough to keep Staff and security running into each other, yelling under the blaring alarm. They take a hallway meant for the rotating janitorial staff, duck into the supply closet with the broken window (the only place you can smoke inside without getting caught, say the custodians), and scramble out. They feel shards of glass slice into the skin on their stomach, not too deep. Hopefully. They hit the ground and run for the scraggly patch of woods between the institute and the highway. *Whoever Mara's people are, they'd better be quick, or they won't find me.*

Auri begins to distinguish the sounds of a helicopter starting up and people yelling into radios around them. *Already?* They're nearly to the woods, but they think they can feel their lungs tearing. They aren't especially strong. They're not even strong for a patient of the institute.

But I have to make this. The air between them and the thicket goes soft. Auri swings their arms hard, and leaps. In the air, they shut their eyes.

Then they land, stumbling onto their hands and knees, hissing at the impact.

“Hello.”

Auri instinctively scrambles away from the voice. But all the other sounds of the people and the chase have gone abruptly quiet.

“You’re safe.” Two broad hands reach softly towards them, palms up. They are attached to a large and unthreatening woman in a dense knit sweater, perfect for the weather. It has cables.

“Are you Auri?”

Auri remembers how they feel. No one is after them right now. Ahead of them is a smooth, calm lake, lapping the shore grey. Auri is alright. “Yes. How do you know that?”

Auri is surprised at their ability to speak. The woman just smiles. “Because I was waiting for you to get here.”

“Mara’s—” But then they understand. They look up at the woman, the person they are meeting *in the future*, who looks back down with gentle concern.

Auri stands. They look beyond the woman into the forest, where they see more people. Another pang of fear shudders across their skin, but they know that these people aren’t interested in Auri’s capture. They aren’t other captives, either. They are all wearing pajama-like clothes of various makes and colors, uniforms similar to Auri’s. Auri lifts their arms. They see their mint-green sleeves, dirty. Something under their throat stirs and they speak. “Is everyone here?” Then, “I can’t remember, I—”

The woman holds out her hands again. “It’s okay, Auri. You have time. And you have—” she gestures around herself. “—the only people like you in the world.”

So Auri looks around again. The people are young and old. Some of them are children. Some of them are sleeping curled in the sand. Two of them have dogs. Auri is jealous. And Auri knows, somehow, that they got here the same way as everyone else, that same little path.

“But—I’ll go back!” Auri’s eyes sting and they push them shut with their palms.

“Go back?” The woman sounds confused but patient. “Why would you go back?”

“I’ll have to.” Auri drops their hands and balls up their fists by their sides. “I’m—not here yet. There’s time in between.”

They aren’t surprised when the woman seems to understand. Still, she shakes her head. “But you’re *here*.”

“Yes,” Auri hears their voice break off into a whisper. “But *not yet*. I haven’t made it yet.”

The woman smiles. “You are thinking how they think now. The ones who want to keep you nailed to a single point in time, whichever is clearest to them at the moment. Their motivation is great. They’re afraid of anything that isn’t the small patch of instant they already know. They can be very persuasive.”

“But—” Auri pulls at their sleeves, wishing for a moment they would tear. “But I haven’t made it out. I don’t know if I will, if I can.”

“But you *have*. You’re here. You know you will make it, because you are here.” She takes a slight step back from Auri, as though gifting them more air. “You get to be certain, certain of yourself and the life you live. No matter for how long, or how many times you have been made uncertain of what you are. And whether it is okay.”

Auri realizes that they understand. They are guaranteed this moment. Even when they left, they would return. This is their power: time is a sky, and Auri has wings.

They nod. “Okay. I’m going back.”

The woman tilts her head and waits for Auri to explain. They hold her gaze. “I’m going to escape. I want to see it. I know it will hurt and feel bad and scary. And I know where it will end.” They gesture weakly around. They are tired. “I will be back. I am back.”

“Yes,” the woman says. She smiles, like she is looking at someone she really cares about. “Yes you are. I will wait for you here.”

Auri gives her a small smile. They turn to the lake. The air fuzzes and blurs. They can feel their fatigue changing, trickling into terror and exhaustion, adrenaline, a thin film of cold sweat. They’re faster than they thought. They are fast enough. They fall. When they land, all they must do is run.

Author's Note

Time and memory are great sources of trauma and joy for me, and almost everyone I know. They are places where all kinds of symptoms can show themselves. They are also mediums for resilience, tools to maintain selfhood in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity. There is also a way in which time functions differently for people with a relationship to their gender that moves close and far from them, from the world, and, hopefully, is always (in a way) arriving back at themselves. I wanted to communicate the way that someone can pinpoint pieces of themselves across their whole history, live in more than one of these moments at once, and use memory and prefiguration to maintain selfhood under even the most oppressive circumstances. I also wanted to gesture to the way that healing from trauma, through surviving the acts of continuation and understanding the self and the world, shapes the people we become. We never get to be separate from ourselves. And we are never separated from what is sacred about us.

This story is dedicated to Addie Leabman.

Entry II for the Photography of Jess T. Dugan

D'Santi, 54, Santa Fe, NM, 2017 (object: photograph and interview)

D'Santi holds a blue-and-green guitar across the front of his body. I have never seen a guitar that color. He touches it protectively, like one might touch a dog who once kept them alive. He looks slightly down at the camera with his chin tilted up. The scruff there grows asymmetrically. He holds one hand in the other, tight, both ringed. Tattooed snakes twist up both his forearms. On either side of his head, a mountain range is reflected bluey in the window panes. The world around him seems colorful and vast. "I missed the first fifty years of my life, but I'm not missing the second fifty." No amount of time in the dark is inconceivable. I can shut my eyes and remember fifty years of darkness just by adding a few other darknesses together. Or subtracting from others. D'Santi lived in those fifty years. He learned to drink until the edges of his body blurred, shapes drained of their power to sit there and hurt. He learned to play music, too, like a voice that sounded right, and he fell in love. "CC." Sometimes the people who love us can see it in us. I know this. *Us?* CC *saw* it in him. She could touch it with her hands before he could, the thing he actually was. D'Santi is beloved and unalone. He is someone I will never meet. He is awaiting the future. His future, and all the future he gets to live inside of. He will wake up tomorrow. He will never have to go back.

To what?

The lover's ability to catch and see through D'Santi is familiar to me. I feel bad, like someone has pointed to something and said, *Do you remember this?*

(Of course I don't. There is no collective past. There are only the living and the dead, and the few ways I know to connect myself to both. Like if I remember any more, it will all be taken away, anyway.)

Alexis, 64, Chicago, IL, 2014 (object: photograph and interview)

There is no singular word for what happens when you are systematically denied access to yourself in your childhood home. Maybe it is not something to be expressed in language, only lived through, or lived in. Alexis has warm eyes and tanlines on her shoulders that stretch just wider than the straps of the white top she wears. Her hair is soft, a bouquet of strands of different silvers, pulled-back. Behind her is a tree and a fence, neither of which seem fully extant beyond her kind face. It looks like it is a nice day. (One of the days where anyone would want to go outside, even—) Alexis was four when she made the announcement, and when the adults in her life started keeping her separated from objects of girlhood. She couldn't speak of it too loudly, she knew and was told. It was not only dangerous because, to her family, it was wrong: it could also be used as evidence that her family was caring for her inadequately. "Back in those days social service agencies would yank the kids and put them in Indian schools." Alexis was four when she realized what she was. I doubt she was much older when she learned that what she was was grounds for abduction. Teaching someone not to be something can also teach them *how* to be that thing. Alexis became grown and beautiful, fighting off the oxymoronic flirtations of men who did not understand her to be fully a woman, fully *person*. Alexis is smiling slightly, mouth partway open, calm. She entered adult womanhood without a childhood of training for it. She joined her mother and sisters there, in a world of ongoing treacheries. She is glad to be alive and getting older.

Devotion (2012) (object: photograph)

I've seen this before, one person and a lover out of frame. You can tell it is a lover because of the look on this person's face, which has a look of the stalwart love of someone caring for a salvific entity. This person's body is unclothed and soft. Their skin is warm and pink and blue. The lover is wearing blue jeans and a boot. We cannot see the rest of the lover, but we know what they look like in the mirror that is the pink and blue soft lap in which their boot lays. The unclothed person is lacing up the boot. This is a surgical ritual of shapechanging. When the lover is laced up, they might enter the world, perhaps to go to work. Maybe the unclothed person stays home, safe, or maybe they will have to change shape and go out too. They are hoping to see each other at the end of the day, so they seal each other with amulets, like the bootlaces. It is easy to imagine others, keys, wallet, phone. *Here they are, honey. By the front door.*

I feel grounded when I am surrounded by objects. A miniature pair of scissors, a laundry basket, smooth little stones, an empty jar to wash and drink water from. *Keys, wallet, phone.* Here, looking at photographs, I do not have anything. I am just a selfhood using my eyes like periscopes to see something that is actually very far away. Here, halfway between the world I know and another, I have empty or sealed pockets. Do I know this lover? I am sure I know how it feels to hold someone's foot this way. I am sure I have done it, although I can't possibly be certain.

Connor pregnant, 2012 (object: photograph)

Connor looks tired of standing, but not unhappy. One thumb slipped into the loosish waistband, other hand cupping the heavy belly. The body that will become a child stretches out

the skin on Connor's body that cloaks it. Pale, chin-length brown hair, parted cleanly, and a tattoo of a figure stretching up the side of the body and partway onto one of Connor's breasts. Connor has a hair tie around one wrist, and a watch strapped to the other, the excess strap sticking out a little. A ring on one finger. Connor is wearing only grey sweatpants, seems ambivalent about being otherwise naked. I am jealous of this ambivalence. Maybe it is because it is all I really want out of myself, to stand my own body without adulteration, standing on the porch. Is it a wedding band? I choose to think that someone gave Connor this ring. And the porch too, the green shingled wall, and the daylight. I try to decipher the time of day and can't, but I remember a ring I bought in Virginia, and I remember that I accidentally dropped it into a small plastic bag that held our trash. The ring was going to be for somebody. I flung the bag up into a dumpster, realized what I had done, and climbed the side with a long stick to retrieve it, pulling my heavy body up along the flaking metal. I got it back, bag fished up with the stick, triumphant over the stinking summer garbage. I wonder sometimes if that person still has the ring I gave them, but I doubt it. They probably got rid of it. I got rid of the one they gave me.

(My friends sing to each other. I can't sing. I watch their lips move. There is a guitar. There are several guitars. What a world to live in, to have three guitars in one room, all of them working. I watch my friends weave their voices. On good days, now, I can make my voice out. I can hear the words I think. I have lost privacy from myself. I can see people waiting for me to tell them what I am in my own words, but I don't think I can do that.)

Good to Be Here With You

We do think about Earth. Even when we're not telling stories about it, Earth is a nagging memory, absent like a person. Absent from us, rather than the other way around. Blue Planet might be a different color now, like green or grey or black. And she can't see us. No one sees us but us, peering out from our changed, sunken places, scraps and deposits of soft human body cloaked in gear that keeps us alive and able to move. You don't get to keep the shape of your body when you're up here this long. We don't mind. That's why we're here.

Pat ricochets off the far wall and twirls back toward me in slow motion. The air hums with the impact sound. Not everything you do is graceful out of gravity, but it sure feels that way, and that's how stuff gets broken. I try to talk, but my throat's still dry from sleeping for, by Belvidere's count, two years, so I make a barking sound of displeasure, two-toned, *please-stop*. We're in the greenhouse. Delicate plants curl tendrils of root and green out in all available directions from a structure that stretches the length of the room, a table with stuff on the underside too, midway between the floor and the ceiling. Pat, suit barrel-round with arms and legs and hissing respiratory support, is too high for any gear to clip the plants, but that can change quick. Pat twists and catches a beam near the ceiling and stills. The suit shrinks a little, sheepish.

We split up and move on. It turns out that you can fill up the cargo chambers on a big mining ship (we call ours *Belvidere*, it's not technically ours) with almost anything, even living things that grow, so long as you fit it out right, which shouldn't be that hard if you start from human life support and work backwards, but I guess I don't really know. In addition to the plants there are all kinds of simple animals, on their way to being space-domesticated, I think. They're supposed to do things like yop if they think something's wrong with the air, or cuddle a sad

spaceperson back into productivity, but not yet, not these ones. Ours are the early generations who live in the dark. Some of them howl sometimes. Usually we're asleep. There's one kind that produces some kind of bat milk, which Belvidere makes us drink. It's alright. Apparently it's super good for you. Not vegan, but still efficient. That's our crew.

I check meters on a chamber that has a small, heavily-tinted window. I don't know why it has a window. Inside it's dark. My light, the one in the middle of my chestplate, kicks down to its dimmest setting. It knows to do that around the bats. Bat-things. The meters are where they were last time I woke up. I always leave a mark on the glass of the meter with a dry-erase tip retractable into the glove of my suit, the forefinger. Just in case I forget how to count. I smudge away last time's mark and draw a fresh one in the same place.

When every living thing and piece of incomprehensible equipment has at least been looked at we all barrel into the cafeteria at around the same time, catching ourselves on the bolted down tables and benches. Uncareful, I clack my suit against Fen's. Fen's suit is tall and willowy, with arms like shiny black whips that end in grabs like oversized surgical manipulators, three-fingered babyhands with robot megastrength. My shoulders are caught by these, clamped, and Fen pulls up so we're face-to-face, except we're not. I laugh, and the sound is like the recordings of early-model Earthcars they'd play for us in school. *First the ground. Then the stars.* I look hard into the dark patch where a face might be if you made a drawing of Fen off just a silhouette. No face, so I look deeper, straining, like peering into opened fruit flesh looking for the stones, and I find the stones, Fen's two wet eyes in the shadows of the thin head-and-torso carapace. "*Hah!*" I snap, like I've won something. Fen huffs and whips away, over the table to the other side.

Su shunts the room's gravity lever with a dexterous hip check, and the sound of a steel hip, flocked all over, moving an aluminum and plastic lever is exquisite. I let the soft sound keep singing to me as we all sink slowly to the floor, untangling ourselves, more music. I try to take in less sound so I can focus, crawl into my seat at the head of the table. The table and room are both round, so the head is arbitrary, but we still call it the head if we need to reference it, moving around it, or me. I can see right across to the door, so I know I'm in the right seat.

"Captain!" Fen almost sings, always the second one to take a chair. This doesn't mean anything. Fen's just fastest. Everyone follows, solid sounds and shapes assembling around me.

My name is Captain because, back in the early years, I could get a little bossy. Before I came aboard I had an ugly, overly masculine name, also my father's. I don't think anyone else even remembers that name. But I am not the captain. Belvidere is the captain, if anyone. Anything. I am the moderator, mediator. But maybe that isn't any different from being in charge. Maybe it's just that I won't admit to being in charge, or that I've ended up here, again, pulling strings and starting conversations so none of us hate each other, or me. Just as it was on Earth, before, below.

Back when we first started fiddling around with Belvidere's fabricators and making suits I was the first one to ask Belvidere to make something for my brain. We were bored and lonely and missing food that came in shapes and we really wanted to know what the fabber could do. I wanted to enhance my existing talent for helping two or more people talk something through. It took a long time and a surgery and it turned out Belvidere couldn't tell if I'd live or die, but I was asleep for three years and didn't feel a thing. I got all hypervigilant when I woke up and then I got better. There's a scar I don't bother to look for now, somewhere on the thin skin on my skull. And then it turned out the thing worked. Everything sings to me now, and sometimes it's like I

hear the singing better than the words. I feel it on my skin. That's where the important stuff is a lot of the time. Everyone needs someone to listen to them, actually listen, not think about other stuff. So I listen to everybody and ask them to listen to each other. So I do that. I think it helps. I hope it helps.

There are nine of us. At first, we didn't wake up all at the same time, but then we started to. This made us all nervous, but now it doesn't. We're pretty sure it's supposed to be in shifts, but by now we've asked Belvidere several times not to change it back. It's good to be here, together, even if it's on a set time limit. A base of two hours to resolve minor disasters and mostly confirm that nothing has changed, plus two hours of leisure time. Belvidere's actually a very sophisticated life-support system, even if it's tacked into an old ugly mining vessel, so it's not beginners' work to get into its code to change that. Humans are more expensive when they're awake, they eat more that way. Em-Em and Inky both took an interest in programming many years ago, but Em-Em thinks it wouldn't be a good idea to be out of hibernation longer anyway, because we could run out of food, wherever that comes from.

But we do have spare time. It's a perk of being the best at what we do, as far as we know. That's how I think about us sometimes. *The Best Ever*. We get two base hours to check on the ship. This time, we got done in twenty-eight minutes.

I spread my gloved hands on the table. Aside from the tools I've had built in, the marker in my right glove and the small knife in my left and others, my suit gives some mobility support to my old body. It keeps my spine right, especially my lower spine, where I get the most pain. My suit is about the size my body was when I came aboard, slightly taller. I recently got all the outside of it painted red. But the exciting part is where my helmet connects to my brain. A lot of

us have little powers like mine now, but I was the first, and I almost died, according to Belvidere, but I also made everyone brave enough.

“So,” I say. A metallic rustle as all the suits arrange themselves politely around the table. I haven’t seen their faces in years, not all the way, not most of them, but I’ve watched them all grow, Fen and Inky and Su and Pat and Ade and Carol and Sweet Pea and Em-Em. And me. We can all pick us apart from each other.

“I think I saw a bat!” Ade speaks up first, voice modulating loud and musical in the mouthpiece of the suit. Ade had a quiet voice, almost-gone voice in the early years, before the suits. A degeneration of the throat and the things inside it, for no reason at all. Ade’s suit is strong and sleek, dark green and blue, and can change heights with a few clunks and whirs.

I listen for the singing strands of air and find mostly a soft contentment, with a little apprehension. I gesture to Carol, who’s putting the apprehension out like feelers.

“I saw it too, flying. We’re supposed to record that, right?” Carol is always a little nervous, although less so as time passes. There are rumors you can get lost in remembering, think about Earth until you lose your mind, wind up feeling like a handful of dice thrown so fast and so far and for so long that everyone’s forgotten and so have you. I think Carol is afraid of that.

Ade’s voice makes a little whirring sound and raps a plated blue knuckle on the table. “Oh, we do? It was right by the window.” Ade’s the youngest of us, Carol’s one of the oldest, but they get along crazy, tend to toggle the energy to a stable medium between them. Ade, being from a desert moon, probably had an impatient sleep waiting to hear all about Blue Planet. Carol’s from Iowa City, Earth, is probably waiting for Ade to tell grey moon stories.

“You have to log it.” Fen says this. Quick, steel-nerved, efficient, impatient, that’s Fen. Good thing too, or I’d have to talk more than I do. Then I’d probably have to ask Belvidere for a new voice.

Carol and Ade look at each other. Fen snorts. The air changes tune, crew reacting to Carol’s sheepishness meeting Fen’s standoffishness.

Su, whose suit is flocked all over in fuzzy patches of all colors, gloves and boots resembling strange paws, asks, “Where do you log it, Fen?”

Fen snakes an arm over the tabletop and then back again, tentacle-smooth, a fidget. “The animal behavior log.”

I listen to the room, peering from being to being. I mostly detect nervousness, but there’s a sound like fluttering paper and domino tiles that I recognize as quick thinking. Up here, within Belvidere’s walls, little worries and miscommunications can bloom fast and become unwieldy, not good in nine-top isolation. I can intervene gently, if I’m lucky, avoid most nonideal scenarios. That’s what I tell myself. I listen close and scan the faces.

There. “Sweet Pea, what are you thinking?”

Sweet Pea’s suit looks a little like a person-shaped wall with shallow shelves coming out of the front. Even moving, that’s how it looks. Little grow lights jut out like collarbones and shine a gentle pink light onto the shelves, where strange lettuces grow. Sweet Pea brought the seeds, who knows from where. We all got to bring a few small things. I try to send Sweet Pea a calm, ready feeling across the strings. Sweet Pea is silent for a few seconds, then speaks in a sweet, haunting sort of voice that I imagine can only be achieved through a combination of careful training and the confidence of good old Earth hormones, in this case taken even before coming aboard. “I was just thinking that some of us may have never needed to use the log before.

The critters don't do much when we're up, right? But Carol, Ade, it's in part for the computer, to better provide for the animals, if I'm remembering right."

Good. A sensation of soothing, a beat of quiet calm. Carol says, "Can someone come show me?"

We all go. As we turn off our cafeteria gravity and pull ourselves back out into the hallways, I brush my suit shoulder against Sweet Pea's smooth, slightly curved synthetic wood back panel in gratitude.

Em-Em pulls up a form on the computer by the enclosure. It has an old-time keyboard, the kind with letters. The keys are plastic. We thought it was weird the first time we saw it, but it turns out it's good to have two choices for input like that, in case the stuff they drip you full of while you're sleeping for years at a time makes your fatigue condition flare harder than it ever did on Big Blue, which happens to Em-Em sometimes, and you feel less than confident putting in a gestural command to the computer. Em-Em's hands do better together in one place on those days, body buckled into a chair, though Em-Em always does the best at the computer, any computer, having packed away more learning about coding up here than would have been affordable on Earth. Em-Em asks for a description of the sighting, takes it down from Ade, who is trying not to dance and break something. Em-Em submits the form. Happy chirrup and wolf whistling, but I feel something tug, so I look back, and there's Carol, dejected or embarrassed, just a little. I nod to Su, then back to Carol. Su slings an arm around the shoulders of Carol's suit, soft with burlap-y metal mesh, and Carol gives, even kinda-chuckles, a faraway sound, a loud ant in a tin can. Su says something, maybe *Thank God* or *Be afraid, it's a blessing up here to feel that, or anything.*

Back in the cafeteria a few of us drum on the table with our arms and hands as the gravity returns, letting us sink into our seats. Then we are quiet. This quiet is uncomfortable. There's this feeling that if we stop talking, we'll disappear.

A sound like a gasp comes out of Su, real and throaty, not just the suit moving. "May I tell a story? It's about a date."

"*Dating story!*" Everyone is excited about this. *Dating* is something other people do, people who live in the past and on a planet. I'm pretty sure we signed away our right to fall in love for the duration of our time aboard, not that anyone would catch us. Dating just isn't something any of us seem to want out of each other. What we do want out of each other is everything we remember. *You exist, so I exist*. We want to have one memory among all of us. We want to remember enough to feel like we remember everything.

Su sweeps an arm over the table, indicating the beginning that we should all be quiet. "I've never told you this one."

Em-em makes a little sound I identify as a giggle. Sure, when Su says something like that, it doesn't quite mean anything. I can't imagine how Su would've been able to fake a good short-term memory if one was required for spacework, or anything at all. Em-Em and Su fought a lot in the early days. After I got my implant, I would sometimes ask them both to sit down with me and talk. They agreed, which surprised me. They still communicate with the same ferocious energy, like they're fighting, but they're not. Su catches Em-Em's giggle and a panel on the inside of the suit flashes awake, leaking light at the throat seams. That's the memory aid Inky and Belvidere and Su made together, sifting through video and audio recordings the suit makes, coming to a conclusion for Su to glance down at. "Confirmed! Em-Em will have to be right another time."

Ade hollers and clicks, suit ratcheting up two levels taller. Em-Em says something in an old Earth language, Su's Earth language, giggling still, and Su laughs. The rest of us are quiet, but the strings are smiling. We don't usually wear our translator earpieces. We were all made to know a common language from the time we were born, but that's not the reason. To me, it just seems rude to know every language, be able to listen in on absolutely everything.

Su stands in between chairs, pink flocked metal hands braced against the tabletop, and begins.

SU'S DATE

I know you'll hardly believe I remember this so well. It's from back before all the long-term stuff set in, and anyway, I wrote it all down in my journal. So.

At the time I was with a satellite repair crew, and we had a week and a half planetside, time off. My last night off, that app Hyper matched me with this man named Nate, and he asked me to go with him to this gallery opening. A photographer. Free wine.

I get there, I message him, I don't hear anything back. That's fine. I go inside. I find a crowd in the second room, all around this little stage with a podium. Someone's speaking, and I figure out it's the photographer. I stay at the back and listen. Someone taps me on the shoulder. It's Nate, and he's shaking his head at me, saying something under his breath. He's saying, "You're late."

I do an awkward little giggle and say I'm sorry. I look around. The podium is glass, and I can see the photographer's legs through it, pale and skinny, sticking out of what looked like really nice purple shorts. Had on those huge square glasses that everyone suddenly likes again. It's film photography, which is apparently an *ancient art*. I try to listen. The work is apparently about the *strangeness of intimacy*. I kind of zone out until everyone starts chatting and moving

around. I want to look at the pictures, but I realize Nate is asking me something. A grilling kind of tone. He wants to know what my name is short for. He says he's never seen it spelled like that, without the *E*. This is annoying, so I pretend not to know what he's talking about. I tell him it's not short for anything, and I ask if we can head to the start of the exhibition. He says back, "Well, *Nate* is short for *Nathaniel*."

Turns out the photographer's idea of *strangeness in intimacy* is couples getting caught fucking. There is nothing sexy about this. A dick halfway in somewhere, faux-surprised covering up, wild, embarrassed eye contact with the camera. They are fucking, or almost fucking, or posed like they are about to almost be fucking, in made beds, with two exceptions: one couple is in the woods, and one couple is in a bathtub with no water in it. One penis and one vagina per photograph. It would've been outdated fifty years ago, but there isn't even any turn-of-the-millennium retro intentionality to it. I station myself the wine table when it's crowded and drink three little cups worth without getting asked to stop. Nate finds me there, complains about the wine to the woman who gave it to him. I convince him to let me finish his cup. He starts asking me a lot of questions, stuff like where I grew up, what made me do spacework, that kind of thing. I think he thinks I'm an astronaut. It's nice to be listened to. When he asks me to go home with him, I squint drunkenly down at my watch. I still have hours before my ride's shift ends. I know it's not a great idea. At this time, I'm a woman, trying it, or at least dressing in a way that Nate could only read as deliberately *woman*. I've been feeling a lot better lately, more confident, to the point where I can wear real clothes on Earth and not feel like I was pretending about something, but I know it comes at a price. Still, I feel confident about my ability to defend myself: I'm about six feet tall, a head taller than Nate, and always have a hunting knife strapped to my leg. Sheathed, I'm not crazy. I say I'll come for a short while.

I feel sick in his car, a late-model hybrid. This is just before they started *really* enforcing the car ban, which is also how my friend is going to pick me up later, albeit in a work van. I think Nate might be a bad driver. He seems tipsy, certainly shouldn't be driving, but it's this or I wait at the gallery, and there's hardly anyone else on the road anyway. His car is clean. Barren, like, no indication anyone even used it. The car of someone who still thinks cars can be precious..

At his apartment Nate unsteadily climbs the four steps up to the front door. The door is heavy, and he doesn't hold it for me. It slaps shut behind him, and I have to open it again. The apartment is covered in things. Nice things. Not hoarding, just a bunch of incongruous objects on display, shoes, scarves, more than one engraved cigarette case. I ask if he has roommates and he snorts. Drunkish and crabby, I ask if he has anything else to drink. Maybe more wine. He does. He sits me on the couch at his coffee table and goes to collect it for us. I move to an armchair small enough that he couldn't possibly join me there. I turn on the TV, but it takes me to some kind of on-demand screen I don't know how to navigate. It prompts for a password. I turn it off.

I start looking at his stuff, the nice and niceish junk everywhere. Just in the living room, I find four separate tubes of high-end lipstick, an address book with nothing in it except a name that isn't Nate's and an address in a different state, something that looks like a throw pillow but turns out to be a folded cashmere cardigan, a ring holder with three rings on it, a 2040's indie rock record sealed in plastic, a corncob pipe, and a pair of worn leather flats. And it's not just that all these things are here, but that they're *displayed*, laid out on the mantle and the coffee table and a smaller side table in a way that I'm sure is supposed to be elegant but looks more like a young kid's collection of things only the kid is proud of, like rocks. Somehow, I can almost put it together. The objects look like trophies, *are* trophies, of some kind. I am horrified and almost

delighted. This has always been something about me. I will do too much to keep myself entertained.

Nate returns with a bottle and two glasses. I grab the bottle and work it open before he can try to. This makes him look a little sad. I manage not to laugh at him. Once we both have our champagne he makes us clink glasses. He drinks and I sip. I'm sure it's expensive, the champagne, because of how the bottle looks. I think it's got a handwritten tag. He notices me looking at his things and starts pointing to individual objects and telling me their brand names and prices. He got everything appraised online, there's an app. He says he doesn't keep anything beneath a certain dollar value. "But," he says, leaning forward to slap a palm on my knee, "Girls' things are expensive."

So he takes things from the woman he dates. He's very drunk, so I ask to make sure. He says something that doesn't make sense but means I'm right, something about how *extraordinary* I am. I refill his glass. I go to the bathroom.

In his medicine cabinet, I find a half-full bottle of Buspirone for someone named Jessica who lives two states away. He was stealing *medicine* from people. I now longer feel entertained enough to stay. He's the kind of Earthman who makes you crave the quiet absence of all things, the unfathomable gaps between the stars. You know it's bad when you want to go back to work. When I return, Nate's out cold, wet mouth open. Quiet as I can, I gather every stolen thing that can fit into my purse. I am drunk and overconfident. I empty my glass onto the couch. Nate doesn't react when I search him, and I find seventy-four dollars on him. Then my ride calls me from the parking lot, and I leave.

I give my friend the purse and the money. Nowhere to buy anything where I'm going. If Nate ever tries to find me, I never hear about it. I wasn't rich like the other girls he stole from. I know why he picked me, I do. He just didn't get away with it.

We perform for Su then, standing-and-sitting ovation. Ade cranks up to full height and bellows, "Extraordinary, *extraordinary* people!" in a voice modulated to sound exaggeratedly low and masculine. Fen laughs like a blackbird. Once, on Earth, I went to a brightly lit little school and one of the classrooms had a clock that chimed bird calls on the hour, and blackbird was 2pm. Maybe the suit has a recording of a blackbird it plays when it feels Fen laughing. We are remembering how Earthmen treat us, and it is funny because they can't treat us any way at all anymore. Fen says, "I'll kill him."

Inky makes a falling-bomb whistle. "He's dead, Fen. Be nice."

Su flops down into a seat with a dull clang. "Might not be! He seemed rich, he might've gotten frozen. He's in a tube, or got launched like us—"

"Coming up to steal your most *interesting* possessions." Fen gets up, sits back down, arms whipping but not touching anyone. "And I'll kill him for it. Or for anything." Fen spoke in these absolutes often, as though only Fen could decide if someone should live or die.

Su sits back, looking somewhere behind Fen, suit seeming to shrink a little. "It's weird. We're so far away now. I'm on an armed mining ship, unfindable. He wouldn't recognize me. He's not even the one I'm worried about." Su looks around at all of us.

We know what Su means. Nate wasn't someone whose face you'd see somewhere it wasn't, like someone else's face, and go running off to one of the closets with an old-time door that shuts. Nate doesn't have any power over us now. But maybe remembering him does.

“I want Pat to go next.” Inky cracks our silence, getting up to stand behind Pat. Inky’s suit is glassy and black, with sleek and angular arms and legs that barely seem to attach to the body. Inky’s eyesight went bad fast in the early days. The face of the suit is an oval of what looks like tinted glass through which you can just make out the shapes of a face, blinking red and green in little dots near the throat. It’s a sensor, something like a big eye. Inky rests a four-fingered glove on Pat’s shoulder. Inky is good at getting quiet people to speak, and I suspect it’s always been that way. Pat squirms, nervous but excited, an affect especially endearing coming from the eldest member of our crew.

Because Pat isn’t just one of us, Pat was the *first* of what would become us. The people who would one day assign us all to Belvidere were looking for sleepers and found their first, Pat, 43. Pat says an unmarked truck pulled up in front of his mom’s house. The ships were well on their ways to maturity, but no one had ever hibernated in these pods before. They needed someone to get in the pod and try to crawl back out again after sleeping through years of absolutely everything important. Would the joints still move, would the lungs be alright, nobody had to look pretty so long as they could get to work. Pat slept and woke up again and slept and woke up again for forty more years and change, which seemed worth it enough, since Pat’s mom would be cared for until she died, the whole point of everything.

Inky says to Pat, “I wish you would talk about dancing.” Inky even wiggles a little for emphasis. We know about Pat’s dancing. Inky especially finds dance fascinating. Pat brought a machine aboard, a VHS player, with a few thick black tapes that almost looked like shoeboxes. Pat showed us how it worked, and since then it’s not uncommon to find Inky watching the dance tapes, *Swan Lake* and *An American in Paris*, sitting on the floor in front of a monitor hooked up to the tape reader, gently swaying along.

Pat stands, and Inky moves to make room. We lean forward, Sweet Pea casting a soft pink glow over a patch of table, spilling a little substrate. Carol stares at the tiny pile hard, like trying to vanish it, until Su brushes it to the floor. Pat's chest hisses, supports preparing lungs to speak.

PAT THE TAP DANCER

My mom put me in ballet and tap dance lessons when I was really young. I kept it up until I was a teenager, but eventually I quit. This happened a little bit before I quit. I think I was fifteen.

I loved dancing. Sometimes I would look in the big mirrors and just watch my arms move, look for the hard muscles underneath my skin and fat. I loved moving. I felt like I could swallow all the air around me, become it. Ballet let me sculpt something really pretty out of the way I stood, moved, flew. Tap dancing let me make music. I was always loudest, because I was always heaviest. I could feel the floor drumming back up into my feet. When I danced I felt beautiful, I think, and invisible. Like a canvas, like an array of colors. It was wonderful. I didn't quit because I stopped loving to dance. I quit because, even when I could feel so otherworldly, nobody else seemed to think I looked that way. They saw the same arms, chest, stomach, and hips as I always had. I knew what I really looked like, and it was too weird that no one else could see it.

I remember the day clearly because it was a costume day. We were getting ready for a recital. I loved dancing, but I hated performing. The things we wore always made me feel like I was on display at a fish market, or like I was at the doctor. Skintight, often all one ugly color, usually the same material as the swimsuits I wore as a little kid, back when I still liked to swim.

We reused the same costumes every recital, which meant that we got to watch the older kids wear some mottled unitard, or something with flimsy ribbons, and then grow into those same costumes as we got older. My two teachers were in the corner, organizing dresses by size. I was sitting on the floor under the barre, hunched so I wouldn't knock my head on one of the brackets, picking at a piece of tape that must have been stuck to the floor longer than I had been alive. The studio was small and slightly dingy, but the dancing was good, and lessons were reasonably priced, according to my father, who considered himself very much the expert on that kind of thing. I was almost asleep with my eyes open when the teachers called me over.

I expected they had found one of the two large dresses stored in the back of the closet for people like me, in the same polka-dot style as the others. Most copies of all the costumes were itty bitty, a shape meant to fit most of the kids who took dance classes. Instead, one of them hands me a cheap kind of black suit jacket, and these stretchy black slacks. I recognize them: one of the boys who aged out of the program a few years before had worn this suit a lot. I looked down at the suit for a long time, thinking I was probably just going to be asked to move it to the other closet upstairs. Instead, my teacher said, "It's *Singing in the Rain*, you know, and we thought maybe you could be Gene Kelly, since there are no boys."

Me? Gene Kelly? He was one of the most famous tap dancers I could think of. I'd seen him dance on tapes my parents had. The way he moved his hands while he pranced and time-stepped around those old sets was really pretty, I thought. I ducked into the bathroom instead of the locker room to put the suit on. I never felt good changing in the locker room. The pants were too long, and I was nervous about the front button on the jacket snapping off, but I looked at myself in the mirror, and I got this feeling that I really, really wanted to dance.

During rehearsals, I would watch myself dance in the mirror. I would make eye contact with myself. I looked a little different from the picture in my head: I wasn't any skinnier or taller, and my hair was still the same. But I looked *right*. It was like I'd finally voiced an opinion I'd kept to myself for a long time. And nobody was mean to me about it or anything. I was still the best tap dancer in our class, thanks to the time I put in by myself on a big wooden board in my basement. No mirror down there, too dark anyway. I had a short solo. I didn't even mind being the center of attention. I felt worth looking at and new.

We did our recital, and for once I felt ready. Even on stage in front of everyone, I didn't have to try so hard to keep my mouth from twitching when I smiled. I had to kind of run and jump up onto this little platform to do my solo. There was no water, not like in the movie. Have you seen *Singing in the Rain*? It's this 20th century musical film. There's tap dancing, obviously, and singing. And rain, I guess.

I quit about a year after that recital. It was like, now that I'd felt what it was like to be seen as myself and dancing, I really couldn't stand it when they put me back in those dresses and unitards and things. I started really dreading lessons and rehearsals. I'd get really sick. So my mother pulled me out of classes. I guess that's how I quit. I just didn't say no to that.

Relative awkward quiet. Sweet Pea asks, "Can you still tap dance, Pat?"

Pat's suit emits a deflating hiss. "No. Or, if I could, I wouldn't."

Fen scoffs. I get nervous, but Fen just says, "They should've let you keep dancing. They wanted only shows where everyone looked the same?"

Pat nods. “Except for the man, or men, whatever the case. They get dressed up different, no dresses or skirts, and a lot of times they get solos.”

Fen considers this, drumming six fingers on the table, annoyed. Fen is almost as young as Ade, and grew up sheltered in a squatter town that then became a legal commune on the edge of some abandoned farmland. Fen’s town didn’t do Earth stuff like the rest of us, save Ade. Fen gets a temper about Earth stuff now, like mistreatment.

Su shakes out two fuzzy hands like they’re wet. “Alright, alright. Bad dance directors are probably hopeful fossils now. Earth was a shithole, but we remember her fondly, no? We all have something from Earth that sticks with us.”

“I do,” Ade says. “But I’m not sure it’s in the way you mean.”

“Thought you’ve never been,” says Em-Em. “Thought you were Full Moon.”

“I haven’t! And I am. But I would meet people from Earth over video calls sometimes, especially in school. Some of our classes were taught by Earth teachers, so our schools wouldn’t be understaffed. Most adults on my moon didn’t want to be schoolteachers. Beneath them.”

Inky performs an equivalent of rolling eyes, loading symbols flashing across the round black face of the suit. “Hardly the same as living there.”

“Hardly,” Ade agrees, “But I knew Earth people still. Earth made herself known.” With the bright suit at no more than a probable human height, Ade sat with good posture at the table and began the story, almost, seemingly, without meaning to.

ADE’S EARTHLING

This was barely a year before I took my assignment to Belvidere. I was seventeen. I signed up for a virtual tour of a place of worship in Italy. It wasn’t required. Most architecture on

the Moon I'm from was bland. Designed by Earth people. Sometimes Earth people are really afraid of moons, so they build bunkers like they would in an Earth war. I don't mind, but I know a lot of Moon persons who went into architecture for that reason. Because everything was so ugly. People stayed nostalgic for Earth, and museums set up these virtual architecture tours that you could choose to go on. I mostly went when I had to for school. But this one was optional. I just had nothing better to do.

The software always quizzed us after the tours, so I remember trying to take note of as much as I could about the stone walls and floor when the tour guide walked into frame. It wasn't a teacher. It might have been a teacher's assistant. She apologized for the teacher being gone and then gave the tour herself. It must have been warm on Earth. She wore a tunic with an open back, and when she turned away to point to the stained glass windows and describe the chemical process of how gold made the glass red, I could see this thick black line just to the side of her spine. I couldn't stop looking at it. I kept hoping she'd turn around and just keep pointing at the windows so I could see it clearly for longer. It looked like a strip of electrical tape, or something like that, and I didn't even realize it was a tattoo until one of my crasser classmates asked about it near the conclusion of the session.

She turned back to face a camera, like she was looking at us, and asked, "Sorry, is it distracting?" She was grinning, hands propped on her hips like she'd been doing some kind of physical labor. I felt like she was grinning at me. I was embarrassed for having attached so much of my attention to it. Even though I was alone at the computer terminal in my private quarters, I squirmed in my seat.

The tour guide told us that she had been in a tram accident that had split her along the line of the tattoo like a seam. It took her body a long time to recover, but only about as long as

expected. It could have been much worse. It almost was. It just takes a little thing, I knew already, to kill someone, and often less to make them experience chronic pain in Earth's gravity. But these things had not happened to the woman. The woman had gotten the tattoo to remind her that those things could have happened to her. Almost did. She smiles when she tells us this, because she is explaining something that we can't actually understand.

It is hard to get hurt where I grew up. You spend most of your time in what you all might think of as isolation, physical isolation, anyway, with instantaneous contact with anyone else on the Moon available at the tap of a few keys. For people who like to spend a lot of time reading, it is an ideal scenario. It was. Living quarters might have changed by now. I liked reading enough, playing and designing intricate computer games with my friends and having total privacy, these things were nice. I knew I was lucky, because this moon was a particularly beautiful place with a long waiting list for transfers. But, my grandmother had been one of the main architects of all our plain buildings, and so was given a spot to pass down through her family. My parents and I once lived together in one of the larger rooms. When I was sixteen I moved into a smaller room and my parents left for a different moon. I had decided not to go with them, and they agreed, so long as I lived near an adult I knew. As it happens, I moved into the room next to that occupied by a coworker of my father's, who checked on me often. I wanted a new experience of total agency. I thought that might be my problem, that I didn't make enough of my own decisions. So I lived alone.

But I knew I wouldn't stay there forever. Moon rooms are for scholars and scientists, and I knew I couldn't do those things. So much confinement and precision. I could change the scenery in my room at any time, and I often spent a long time doing that, toggling wall and light color, ambient noise, and ambient scent at my terminal. But I couldn't surprise myself that way. I

took long walks in the courtyard and hardly saw anybody. Those I did see had little interest in me. I couldn't figure out why I had so much interest in them. It is like I had something I wanted to tell somebody, something that nobody wanted to hear. So I had never tried to say anything out loud.

The woman from Earth wasn't like me at all. She seemed to have figured something out, marked it visibly with a tattoo, and worn clothing that would deliberately show it. It isn't easy to get hurt where I grew up because there were no surface vehicles, other than personal ones, like wheelchairs. Nothing big or fast enough to tear my back like the Earth woman's. I devoted a lot of thought to her. I used to try to bring her up with my friends. "Hey, remember the tour guide with the tattoo?" They didn't. I remember once, I was undressing to bathe before bed, and I stopped to pull a mirror out of a drawer. I held it up and twisted, so that I could see the part of my back where the tattoo would be if I were the woman from Earth.

I started having nightmares. I had had some nightmares as a young child that woke me up screaming, but I'd been given some sort of patch that made them stop, eventually. I would have just called the base hospital to get a prescription, but all the nightmares were about the Earth woman. They all started the same. In an otherwise empty room I would find her sitting on a wooden stool, arms at her sides and legs crossed, naked. This embarrassed me at first, even though no one could see it but me. She would be smiling at me the same way she'd smiled at the camera on the virtual tour when she talked about her accident. She wouldn't say anything. Eventually, I would walk around to her. I didn't want to, but I had no other choice. There was nowhere else to walk to. And there I would see it, her back split open right along the seam where I had seen the tattoo. The cut was straight, starting beside her left shoulder blade and ending halfway down her lower back. She looked like a giant paring knife had made this cut to de vein

her like a shrimp. I had never been on a tram, and I couldn't imagine what disaster had caused this. The split widened and narrowed with her breathing. Inside that wet darkness, something moved, like a fish when you scoop it out to change the water and clean the tank.

Sometimes, I would stick my hand into the split, always surprised by the warm wetness, until something grabbed my hand to pull itself out. Other times, the tour guide's body would wriggle, jerk around as though repeatedly shocked, and fall off the stool to the floor, and then the thing would claw its way out. But it wasn't a thing. It was the woman, the tour guide, only wilder, still naked, now shining and smeared wet with blood, her blood.

I started having great difficulty sleeping. This is rare on the Moon. The rooms are like Belvidere: they're supposed to keep you healthy. But I refused the sleep aids because I was afraid, no matter how much my room tried to talk me into sleeping. I saw her everywhere, smiling. I was on edge and tired all the time. I even caved and ordered the nightmare patches, two of them, but they didn't work. I slept on the floor. My friends still called, and my father's colleague would check on me, but it was like they wouldn't really look at me. Like no one had ever looked at me. I didn't even know what I looked like. I would wake up near the closet, roll over, and look at the clothes I chose for myself every day, and I couldn't remember why I had chosen them. Had I ever liked these things? I lost weight. I looked bad. I knew I had to do something drastic, but all the doctors were treating me as if nothing much was actually wrong. Some kind of sleep disorder, they would find the right pills soon. They asked me questions I couldn't answer, questions that didn't matter.

I got sick of it. I had to leave. I knew I couldn't leave her behind, forget her, but I knew that she was telling me to *get out*. I used my terminal to search for the first available entry-level spacework assignment. Which was this one. When they asked if I would be willing to go into

long-term cryosis, I was even more excited. I spoke about it with my parents, neighbors, friends, and they all encouraged me. The traveller, the explorer. Something else. Plus, someone would want my room. My parents were sad, until they weren't. They were supportive, and excited. They could finish off their experiment, parenthood, with an air of finality, and with a great story. My mother's greatest fear was that I would get lost in space, you know. That was her only hesitation. She died back in the early days, you'll recall, of uterine cancer. She never had to worry about a thing.

I put a different name from the one I had always had on my application, Ade. I felt better as soon as I stepped out of my room for the last time. On the shuttle ride to the transfer point to get my pod onto Belvidere, I did something I wouldn't have been brave enough to do on the Moon. I tried to find her. I sent query messages to the Earth school that hosted that virtual tour. They said that according to their records the tour I went on was led by an elderly professor, and they gave me his name. I pulled up his headshot to confirm that I had never seen him. There was no record of anyone else leading the tour with him. Just a handful of Earth students attending the lecture. I never dreamt about her again. But I think about her every time I am awake.

Ade lifts both hands, indicating that the story is over. Fen purrs thoughtfully, drumming metal fingers on the table top, softer now.

"Damn," says Su. "That was kind of a ghost story. Scary. Thank you, Ade. I didn't know much about that. Only that you wanted to get off the moon."

Carol sits forward, metal mesh crinkling. Carol's got one of the suits you can see the wearer's face through, and there's Carol's, smiling. "Did you ever find out *what* it is you are?"

“Still no!” The body in the suit cackles, not modulated, but amplified. “But I don’t need to now.” The suit clacks up until it’s tall as it will go again, and Ade starts to prance around the perimeter of the room. It sounds like a trash can dancing. Fen slithers up onto the tabletop, clicking three fingered claws open and shut, like castanets for a flamenco dancer. I worry about this last thing Ade said, but I don’t say so. I pack it away until it becomes just a small tightness in my chest.

“Kind of makes you wonder,” Sweet Pea croons, “What we would do if we could go back to Earth.” Sweet Pea’s harvesting the grown leaves of the strange lettuces growing from the wall-like suit and placing them into a bowl. We’ll put the bowl in the food fabricator, and Belvidere will add dressing and the approximation of other vegetables. Belvidere’s food tastes recognizably fabricated, but not unpleasant.

Without stopping the clicking, Fen says, “Are you kidding? I wouldn’t go back. Who knows what’s there now anyway. Bones. Styrofoam.”

We can’t go back to Earth because we don’t know how to control the direction of the ship. Belvidere and Mission Control were supposed to do that. Now it’s just Belvidere.

“I might be curious to know if it’s still inhabited,” says Inky. “I was kind of into that thought when I signed up as a sleeper. Obviously, I’m not that curious, or I might try to find out.”

Em-Em, who uses a wheelchair in Earthlike cafeteria gravity, rolls softly into Inky’s leg with a little *thud*. “Like it’s that easy.”

“You could help!”

Em-Em waves a hand gloved a similar mesh to Carol’s suit, but softer and pink and blue. “If I ever take another interest in Earth again, I’ll let you know.”

Earth hurt us, but it has been long enough that we can acquiesce, if not forgive. We still carry our pains with us, even Ade, Moon-pains. There was a time where I thought I could forget pain, forget what it is like to not know oneself, or not want to know. In space there is only *oneself*. There is only me and the others. But it never stops. The soil in the greenhouse has a smell that makes me think, if only briefly, of my father and his vegetable garden. He was glad to see me go to space. He spoke about it with a prideful face reserved mostly for talking about his grandfather, who fought in a needless war and didn't even die until later. Not many people thought like him anymore, thought of honor, but for him, my getting into a sleeper pod and earning money for everyone I was related to made up for everything else. The fighting, the pamphlets from doctors, how embarrassing it was for him to have a *problem* right at the dawn of the new age of spaceflight. I wasn't the problem, none of us were. It was what happened to us that was embarrassing for him.

Belvidere dresses the salad, and we ask for fake champagne too. It's too sweet, and less alcoholic than Earth wine, but we like the bubbles, and Em-Em even drinks it through a straw that swirls around and spells the name LINDA. Linda was never any of our names, but Em-Em brought it aboard anyway. Pat asks, and Belvidere announces in block letters projected on the table that we have two hours left until we have to go back to sleep. Em-em shrugs. Ade says, "Wait. That was her name. The tour guide. *Linda*. I'm almost sure!"

Belvidere woke us up to the blaring of our biggest, loudest alarm when we lost contact with Mission Control a little less than a hundred years ago. We figured out what was the matter, but we couldn't figure out how to turn off the alarm. It was almost an hour, an hour too loud to think in, before Inky asked the ceiling nervously, "Turn off alarm, please?" That did it. There was some panic, and then there wasn't anymore. We figured we'd be back in touch the next time

some of us woke up. We checked everything, making sure the ship could run without Earth contact, and then we checked again. Then we asked Belvidere, all of us crowding around Em-Em typing with quick determination at a computer terminal. Belvidere, outfitted with the most sophisticated life support system on the mass market, could keep us alive all by itself. We didn't know how, and it wouldn't tell us how it worked in terms we could understand.

Belvidere opens a drawer in the wall for us to clear our dishes into. We play an old Earth board game, even though I used to hate board games. Pat remembers this about me and tells me it's okay if I don't want to play, but I do. Inky and Em-Em want to be on a team, and so do Fen and Su. Seven is still too many, so I team up with Carol, who pats my shoulder once, grateful. We don't win. I'm not paying much attention, and Carol can tell, but seems accepting of this. Before we go to sleep again, I sneak out to the corridor with the biggest windows to look outside. I can't tell which direction we are moving. There is no point of reference and there hasn't been for a very long time. I put my hands on my hips, deliberately touching my own body, with layers of the suit I built in between. We can't sleep in our suits, because then the pod wouldn't be touching our bodies directly. We don't have long. Soon, Belvidere will help me out of my suit and into one of the pods. The pods are soft, opaque, keep us standing up like suits hanging in a closet. We can't see each other once we are inside. There's nothing to do but go to sleep. I put my palms on the window and shut my eyes, enjoying my brief waking solitude.

It took a few years after we lost contact for each of us to come to the conclusion that we would not be getting it back. We were still sleeping in shifts, until Belvidere changed that on us. The radios we knew how to use stopped working. If there were other ones, we couldn't even find them. The few maps we could get the computers to pull up were baffling. They weren't made to be read by us. We knew that the mining vessel would continue to route itself to asteroids to

extract metals from, but we couldn't tell where we were, how far apart each of the asteroids were, and how far away we were from Earth and Ade's moon. We still don't. The further we flew, the more likely it felt that Earth wasn't interested in getting us back, not even if we had Belvidere with us. That was okay, after a while. A lot of us weren't very surprised. We looked around at each other a lot in the early days, anxious. Anxious we couldn't keep going, or that we couldn't stop going, in a new world much tinier than the ones we knew and built ourselves for, that was it, we had *built* ourselves for worlds we gave up for work. We had just expected to get those worlds back.

But we've grown to know more about our freedom. We built ourselves for our new world. We continue to. We paid for our world with more than we thought, but we got more than we thought we had paid for. These are two possible consequences of taking part in a transaction which you do not actually have any control over. We have become the best at what we do, as far as we know, or need to know. With Belvidere's help, we have found new ways to grow into what our bodies couldn't become. And no one can see us up here. *God*, no one will ever see us again.

The ceiling emits a soft, nudging chime. The sound makes me sleepy. Pavlovian. I pull myself along the walls, slowly. Everyone else's pods are already sealed when I enter the chamber. I undo and step out of my suit. I brace myself in front of the pod's soft glow, just for a moment, enjoying the sensation of air on my other self, on my skin.

Author's Note

Good to be Here with You is, in metaphor and content, my way of testing out a manifestation of *queer ecstasy*. As speculated upon by scholar José Esteban Muñoz, queer ecstasy is a stepping-out of the the oppressive present moment into a space of timelessness where there is no threat of pain to the queer body⁵. Muñoz references “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” a poem by Elizabeth Bishop, in which Bishop repeatedly invites a lover to “please come flying” over New York City. She assures Ms. Moore, “The flight is safe; the weather is all arranged. The waves are running in verses this fine morning. Please come flying.” While becoming airborne over the Brooklyn Bridge might be fantastical, the tone of Bishop’s promise of escape and safety is familiar. I’ve whispered similar things into cell phone receivers. While Muñoz’s *queer ecstasy* might be utopian, there are smaller exits trans people make from a present moment not built for them. I wanted to experiment with a literal *exit* that was neither intentional nor voluntary. As idyllic as a permanent haven for these nine characters might seem, I know deep down it is never simple to keep a group of people on good terms with each other, no matter how much they have in common to begin with (or don’t). What does it look like to try to maintain sanity and peace? How do people’s different relationships to the worlds they came from interact once aboard? And what would it look like to invent new ways of expression in a tiny, sealed-off world that has no expectations of you? These are the questions that lead me to write this story.

⁵ Muñoz José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 187.

Entry III for the Photography of Jess T. Dugan

Caprice, 55, Chicago, IL, 2015 (object: photograph and interview)

Caprice smiles. She begins her interview and quickly adds, “And my life is amazing.” The way she is sitting makes her sofa look thronelike. Actually, it has nothing to do with the sofa. It’s how she’s sitting in her body that is regal. She is barefoot. Her finger and toenails match in color. I imagine her barefoot as a child, playing with her allotted toys: Tonka trucks, certain colors of sandcastle bucket, plastic jointed men with guns permanently attached to their hips, hands. I imagine a small thumbprint pressed to the center of one of the jointed men’s chest, like looking for something. Finding it, or not finding it. Her feet look comfortable, subtly calloused. From her childhood I can see her age defiantly, resourcefully, borrowing older sisters’ birth control pills and then graduating to the black market as a supplier of hormones. Tradition, a custom of not-dying. Caprice smiles. She had to tell her mother once, and her mother said, “We are not going to say living ‘as’ a girl. We are going to say you are living in your womanhood, your sisterhood. It gives you power, it gives you authenticity.” This feels unfamiliar, a joyful roiling in the stomach. *Oh, of course that’s what you are.* Her mother saw her and neither were ashamed. Caprice has spent her life so far turning back, both palms out, “Look baby, somebody showed me how to get through this block here, come with me and let me show you how to do it too.” Someone who can outlast shame, outshine it. Her pain is leagues beyond comprehension, according to everything I know, but that doesn’t mean she will speak of it as a way to speak of herself. Not where I can read it. She’s wearing something sheer and golden, the corner of a bright pink bra visible as she stretches her arms. I feel embarrassed for thinking of my bras as prisons. They weren’t for me. I do feel shame, I do. It’s out of love. It is always out of love.

If something intrinsic about us is the same, where does my feeling of disconnect come from? Is it time? What is my shame, or at least my bodily consciousness, the one that makes me know where my skin ends? Why can't I reach them, and what am I afraid of hearing again?

Please don't do that, not in front of— The people in the pictures are not afraid. I wish I was in a picture. Not to be with them, I mean, but to be unafraid, even if it's only for a little while, or an endless and shapeless length of time.

Jeans (2014) (object: photograph)

Digging through the mess to expose the hardwood bedroom floor, I pause when I touch my lover's clothes, crumpling the cloth in my fingers a moment, feeling for ghosts. I use my thumbs in the seams. What do I remember that has been sewn into here? I feel as though his things are all I have left of him, even though he is just in the other room, or walking to work. I feel something almost violent, and desperate. I raise my eyes, look for other clothes, empty of other bodies. I find the same grey bedroom where I saw the artist, with grey light caught in their scar. Now, there is a chair with two pairs of jeans on it. The pair on the seat of the chair is more deliberately cuffed than the one draped over the back, and still has a belt slung through its belt loops. The pair draped over the back is blue, with one leg drawn up and the other stretched out, comfortable and slightly animal. The pair on the seat is coiled like it is sleeping. The chair is like an altar for tomorrow, or the end of today, or this morning. A bed materializes invisibly and out of frame, and a window that doesn't face any other windows on other buildings. I've lain in this bed with another invisible creature and told us, *The little thing wrong with me is the little thing wrong with you, and there was never a single thing really wrong with us.* When no one is paying attention sometimes it turns out that there is nothing wrong with you at all. Nothing wrong with

the bodies pulling the hidden flesh of their legs out of their jeans in front of each other. (What then? What do we become when we are allowed?) When I was a little girl, I wore jeans to bed. Now I find my lover's jeans curled under the bed with the legs all crooked, the hollow where his thin body held apart the fabric. A man loving a man and the things he leaves somewhere he knows he's going to return to. Two young tomboys with their hair cut all short, or still long. Discarded clothes like these stay warm with the bodies they were shed from, so long as you do not touch them, and try to feel the warmth. Then it dissipates. The picture is warm with bodies. We are not the same. We just share something. We see ourselves on the surfaces of each other's bodies, and we see someone else when we keep looking. *Come back to bed*, in my voice, or anyone's. Two people, someone sleeps closer to the door, and the door stays shut.

(It hurts to have anything at all, to know it could be gone again. It is terrifying to live in a world where some good things *do* stay. There is not even consistency in what gets taken away to provide comfort. I am learning how to live here. I am learning how to live without thinking it will end in a moment, it must.)

Hank, 76, and Samm, 67, North Little Rock, AR, 2015 (object: photograph and interview)

Samm: "Hank didn't know she was a girl until she was around eleven or twelve." Samm is holding both of Hank's hands on the table. It is a small woven jumble of four hands, a point of connection. Samm is decked out in Broncos gear, hat and jacket. Hat and jacket, what Hank is wearing denotes time in the military. A brick building where Hank and Samm might live fuzzes into a greenish background. They have been together for forty-four years. At twelve, it was decided that Hank was a girl. This was confusing, because these were Hank's parents, loved ones, and they should have known better. Hank wore false shapes then until adulthood. The army

investigated Hank for being gay. Or something. It doesn't take much. Hank loved the army, left home for it. The investigation went nowhere. Hank was permitted to stay. *Permitted*. Hank doesn't say that word, but I can taste it. Samm looks right into the camera, over top of the hands on the table. Samm's eyes are hard, could be green or blue. Hank's face is gentle, almost slightly smiling. I know the depth of this, or can guess it, or imagine. Samm, protector-lover, *I won't let that happen to you again*. Samm: "And so I found this one in Western Michigan. She was different from anybody I have ever met in my whole life and I knew that she would be in my life for the rest of my life." Hank growing used to protection over the course of four decades. *Does it get easier?* I hope, for Hank, it gets easier. Got easier. I want it to be easy to be fully loved. I want the shame to be gone from danger. I want to be gone from danger, and to take everyone with me. But Samm knows better. Samm holds both of Hank's hands and looks at me.

Looks at the camera. I wasn't there. I want to have been there. I want to have been alive with them in the room, any of them. What is it about me that is still lonely, always? Especially now, with all of this evidence, this offered and professed draw to life, aging, and coming home at the end of the night?

I imagine all of these people live in the same little world, even though that's not true, or even really fair. In spite of everything, I feel welcome to this world. I quit resisting my own happy visions. There is no collective memory. But I do remember something. I remember choosing love. When you choose to become yourself, and it doesn't matter how, but you choose love. You choose to be a living body and not a dead one. Sometimes it is easier to love the dead, but you choose to be loved while you are alive. This isn't selfish. How could it be? Plenty of bodies live without asking the world if they should be there. Maybe you asked, and the only response was the clang of beer bottles as your neighbor empties his recycling, the silence of your

four walls. You learn to love yourself, because you must, and from this you learn to make your own answers. I remember choosing love. I remember the phone calls and the doctor's office. It doesn't stop there. You choose love when you introduce yourself, dress yourself, ask for something. I choose love weekly, with half a milliliter of a strange, clearish liquid and a syringe, and each time it really is that choice, and each time the cost is plain, the discomfort of pushing a needle against the skin to break it, and then in further. What am I willing to do for myself? What could be so worth it?

The answer is uncomfortable. *My own life* is worth it. I choose to love myself. (I love myself because I love everyone—) I do not have to be so ashamed. Someday, I think, I won't. And if I do feel ashamed today, it is only because I am visible. It is only because I am defining the borders of my body, drawing my own outline. I choose to love myself. I choose to love everyone. I choose it again. And I choose it again.

Author's Note

When I first encountered Jess T. Dugan's photographs, particularly the two series I write about here, [*Every Breath We Drew*](#) and [*To Survive On This Shore*](#), I was first floored and then deeply haunted by their stark intimacy. Dugan's subjects, human and otherwise, respond to the camera's call with a kind of presence that feels unobstructed and absolute. Dugan gives transgender and gender non-conforming subjects the agency, through their camera, to be permanently beautiful without qualification. "Capture" does not just apply to the camera. To be *caught* means to be discovered, often in an act or state that is somehow punishable. To be *caught* also means to be snatched out of the air mid-fall. In a more metaphorical sense, this second meaning of capture is something like being seen and called to safety by someone who understands who and what you are, the best that they can. Both kinds of being caught feel dangerous, but one is necessary. I wanted to write about, alongside, and into Dugan's photographs (*captures*) and subject interviews because of the way their work *catches*, catches the people in the pictures, catches Dugan, and catches me.

Acknowledgements

For their time and thoughtful responses to my questions, I would like to extend my gratitude to Addie Leabman, Shady Grove Balcom, Danny Valero, Gabriel Jesiolowski, EJ Marcus, and Saint Franqui.

For making beautiful artwork for me to think and write about for this project, I thank Jess T. Dugan, Gabriel Jesiolowski, and Danny Valero.

Thank you to Wendy Kozol for being my brilliant and lifesaving advisor, and to Angela LaGrotteria and Emily Barton for being my brilliant and lifesaving readers.

Thank you to everyone who has supported me through this project and through my life that contains this project. Your faith in me means more than you could know.