

Autumn's Return

A Creative Honors Thesis

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There's two of me. One of me is standing here on the front porch for the first time in three years. The paint peels sea-foam green from the front door, and a mulch of leaves and ladybugs and Jehovah's Witness pamphlets festers on the doormat.

The other me is taking a drive. Everybody has that route they know by heart. You can travel to that landscape in a moment just from a certain scent, a sound. It's as familiar as the ridges of your fingertips.

This is mine. I fill up my tank at Ross' Country Store in Buckrun, West Virginia. It invariably costs four fifteen a gallon but I don't feel like driving to that shiny Love's station just eighteen miles west of here, on the river. I make my usual purchase: a cow tail nougat candy to gum on for the drive. I drive off down the mottled asphalt and pray those darker stretches of hot patch are old enough that other vehicles have pressed them down. Hot patch. The State churns it out and slaps it over the worst potholes in a minute and is gone the next. It's tar-like and close to boiling for half a day. One careless drive by and a loose spray of it will pepper my peeling paint job. But it's always fine, always just cooled enough to cause axle-wrenching bumps. Nothing worse.

I turn left past the VFW. Before I get to the highway there's a half-finished radio tower. It's stunted. A statement. Like somebody raised a finger to say something and you're waiting while they clear their throat for twenty-two years. That tower has been half-finished for my whole life.

There's the highway. I turn right. Before I even reach cruising speed I'm learning basic geometry. Bisect, meaning to intersect an object at a right angle. I'm bisecting the

shale valleys now. I look to my right. There's a cross-section of somebody's life down there, in the houses tucked into the valleys. There's somebody's back yard, like as not to have a rotted wood pile, a green swimming pool— macroscopic petri dishes. That's how we live here in the foothills, growing in the low moist places where the creeks have cut through. Or at the top, dulling the rocks. We're a moss slowly eating through the limestone bedrock ,but something more insidious than that. Tooth decay, growing down down down and mining out the tissue beneath. Deep jaw rot.

On my left, through salt-spattered windows, there's somebody's meadow, full of pretend dead people. A single white cross for every American soldier who died in Afghanistan, Iraq, those other places. A statement. It might have made the news once. I can't remember. But the meadow filled up years ago, and there's no room for the new crosses. A snapshot, then, of somebody's patient anger.

I turn on my left blinker, because here's the church at my exit. A tree used to grow in the churchyard. Maybe an oak. In Autumn, it flushed the loveliest orangey-pink. The color peach slushies taste like. I'd never seen quite that color on a tree before. Haven't since. They cut it down to install a new power line.

I follow a sluggish creek past these landmarks, and the road withers into its most basic self. It's more hot patch than not. A couple of those fluorescent ditch signs. No lines on the road. It winds, serpentine, along with Runner Creek. I scale a hill swirly-ice-cream-cone fashion. Careful at the top now. A boy killed himself last year after taking the turn too fast in too much dark with too much beer in him.

Now I'm on Raise Ridge. I keep right as I drive by these houses on the top, those rounded aluminum ones, like a Spam can split down the middle and turned on its side. Thunderous sounding in the rain, but it keeps the water off.

I'm almost home. I pass a lawn festooned with gazing balls and plaster deer with their legs blown off, grotesque wires holding them up. It's weedy, hazy with pale butterflies, almost organic in its decay, like everything grew this way.

I keep driving. There's a shoebox church, half-painted and sagging a little in the middle of the roof. Methodist. Then there's a pond, scummed over. The man who lives in the trailer just above the pond used to rent out fishing gear and sell pot. He doesn't rent the fishing gear anymore. If I pass by at the right time, which could be any time, day or night, I'll see him planted on the threshold of his front door, smoking with one hand and urinating into his yard. His son's about my age. He's taken up this habit, too. I always avert my eyes.

Up next is the house that's always For Rent, safely nestled into a hairpin turn that everyone blasts around, even me. There's a bank on one side—troughed up with barbed wire, and a field of wildflowers on the other. It'd be a great place to skid out. Hairpin turn completed, the ridge opens out to reveal the rolling valley just below. There's a house jumbled at the bottom of the ridge, looking like something tossed out a window in passing. A soggy cardboard box. My eyes might catch on that sore for a moment, but glance just a bit ahead, and I find myself. A football field away there's another house. Small. Brick. Cookie cutter. And I see a speck down there, all the way down the gravel drive and standing grayly at the front door.

That's me. And it's not some amorphous summer day. It's winter, and I'm holding a key that I haven't used in three years.

The key slides in easily, not rustily or hesitantly like I expect. The place has been waiting three years to see me again. The door opens.

I walk inside to a fuzzy alien world where every surface shifts dully with dust. I remember from high school, my eccentric health teacher lecturing us on the nutrition of a placenta (she ate placenta soup, some said) and how most dust is skin. This isn't my skin. It couldn't be after almost three years. What person am I breathing in? What version of them might it be?

Mom talked about people with chameleon souls. They could be one person one day and another the next, just like they were changing their skin. She would say sometimes, when it was dark and quiet and she was looking out the window, that she had a chameleon soul. I agree with this self-diagnosis. But I am not like my mother. I don't find it so easy to change. I don't know what my soul might be, but it isn't reptilian.

Maybe it's bloodhound. Houses have smells. This one smells familiar, but distant. Of a few months of neglect, and before that, leather boots, red clay mud, the crispness of leaves. It smells like bottled Autumn. The last time these doors and windows were open before Mom left to winter in New Mexico. To bask in the expanse and warmth. Like I said. Chameleon soul.

Mine is not a broken home. It is perfectly whole, and perfectly empty. And it's a modest one. Used to belong to my great aunt but she died of breast cancer and then it belonged to my regular aunt, June, the one I used to talk to, but she died of lung cancer.

It's ours now, and thanks to the women before us, it's nice and paid off. It smelled like smoke when we moved in. I hated it. Two bedrooms, a kitchen, a shared bathroom, a nook by the front door where the aunts kept a small sofa and television. Mom installed bookshelves. The walls splashed various sandy pinks. Trodden Berber carpet. Dust and cobwebs all around. I dump my duffle onto the twin bed in my old room. Like in Mom's room, the sheets are stripped off. That's fine. My bedding from school should fit well. It's convenient, even. My car is filled with the rest of my junk, and after a small break to breathe, I lug my life, box by box, into the bedroom.

Did I manage to accumulate this junk in three years? I've got cheap beaten furniture, ratty towels, and too many USH posters and tees. I can sell a lot of it in the Bulletin Board, or this is my hope anyway. The school paraphernalia I designate to its own untouched corner of the room. Two boxes full. They sit parallel against the wall like a pause button. I separate clothes I can sell from those I will keep. Desk lamp? Sell. Minifridge? Sell. Coffee maker? Crucial for survival. By the time I've finished, I'm exhausted. Just existing in this space stretches muscles I forget I had. But surrounded on all sides by boxes, I'm also cramped. Things. So many heavy spacetaking things.

I unearth my laptop, a technological dinosaur, and pry it open clamshell style. One thing I made absolute certain before I moved back was Internet access.

I'll have to get domestic later on, too. Eliminate all those cobwebs and layers of skin the house grew. But for now, I want to collapse on my naked bed and curl up, childlike.

Sometimes I think she must be disappointed in me. How couldn't she be? Here I am, in the exact place she never wanted me to be, and all I can glean from her are emails about sunshine.

Autumn,

I'm glad to hear you're moved in. How does the house look? I left your room just the same. Sometimes I would rest on your bed and think about you on your adventures. I hope you don't mind. All is sunny here. I enjoyed a walk this afternoon and went shopping at the produce place. Some days I still can't believe there's an entire store devoted to produce.

Tell me how the moving goes.

Love M

She has never been one for telephones, always concerned that they might leak radiation into her brain. I suppose that isn't so radical for someone living in one of the cancer capitols of the nation. She's always been trying to push me away from here and encourage me to clearer skies, cleaner water, flatter land. And once I finally went off to USH, she started renting a place in New Mexico for the winters. She said it was good for her bones. In her emails I could see the love she held for the place. Last year she switched our names to the deed for our land, in case she likes being gone too much. In case she decides she won't come back.

I wonder if she will.

She always had a thing for New Mexico. I never understood why. Still don't. She grew up here in the bowl of the hills, but something drew her to that dried out space. Maybe that's where she was meant to be born. Maybe all of it was a huge mistake.

People started wondering when she was young, and she dropped out of high school just before her senior year. She disappeared into the air.

She ran off to New Mexico, at least this is what I could glean from Aunt June. She was gone for a little longer than a year, then inexplicably returned. For the next decade she drifted from place to place in Newport, not that there were many places to drift. She had a friend group, no one knew if they were wild or not. They went out on back roads. Late night trips to everywhere. A textile factory opened up and she worked there for a while. Then a DuPont, you know, that place that invented no-stick Teflon, which ended up giving everybody cancer. She almost became an accountant, landscaped for a while.

Then she had me. Nobody, not even June, could guess my origins. There wasn't even anyone to guess from. I'm still half-convinced that she conjured me from one of her ribs, or planted a seed and plucked me off the vine like she would any melon or tomato. I like that second one especially, because that's the only good reason someone could have to name her daughter Autumn.

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I wake up late, blink as I try to place myself in space and time. Here. Now. I have to clean the house today. I'm expecting a visitor.

Between subscriptions to job search websites, opaque emails from mom, and correspondences with USH faculty, waits an innocuous email from jperk@malenergy.org. Subject: Re: Meeting.

Ever since Mom announced my return to the area, I've received persistent correspondence. Apparently I'm a softer target. This particular thread has been sitting sluggish in my inbox for the past week. She's trying to sell me something. And like a fool, I took the bait; I'm letting her into my house. At three p.m. today. If I know anything about her type, she won't leave until I've promised something, signed something with blood.

I aim to distract myself through cleaning. If I purge the house of dust, maybe I can purge the foreboding that grows within it. I start with my room.

There's a shrine in the corner by the window. The bookshelf, roughly hewn slabs of pine hammered together with mismatched nails. From my fortress of moving boxes I still see the hammer marks like little waffle irons. Clumsy hammering and soft wood. I could press my fingernails into the grain and peel away strips of fragrant lumber. In its shelves failed origami swans, a photo album containing two blurry polaroids of a creek bed, and books and books and books.

I have memories from when I was very young, of her waving goodbye from the driver's side window, speeding up the driveway from some disposable apartment. Her friend Anne waving toys in my peripheral, trying to distract me. But I would not be moved from watching her car disappear. I would not be persuaded from being distraught. I would remain like this for ten minutes to half an hour, depending on the

day. She always came back. I knew this. She promised this. It was a conversation we had often. But, and it would break her heart to hear this, so much of my younger years are populated with memories of blurred and heaving sobs and the heavy, inexplicable desolation a child can feel in the absence of a parent. And there was anger in me, at the system that made it necessary for her to go away. For her to work. So often, she was leaving.

She tried to console me by bringing home marbles. It was a marble factory where she worked. The centerpiece of my bookshelf is a slim-throated vase with a fake crystal stopper, rim flooded with marbles—shooters and ducks alike in all patterns. Cat's eye, beachball, oxblood, and the crown of my collection, a galaxy shooter wide as my thumb. Mom brought it from work when I was ten. She was a foreman by then and she could take her pick of the reject marbles. Galaxies were expensive. The kind of black that's liquid, no hint of texture or topography, swirled with flecks of white and iridescent blue. Dynamic, frozen, mine. I spent hours staring into the manufactured microcosm pinched between my thumb and finger, never mind the air bubble pocking its glassy surface. I could twist it in the yellow light of my bedroom and imagine the bubble as an entrance into the luminous center, a miles-wide yawn seen from years away. She plunked it into the mouth of the vase the day she gifted it to me. It was like giving me a dream. I don't know what her dream was for herself. Maybe it was me, but I can say with certainty that she couldn't have dreamt of the factory.

They made things other than marbles, I suppose, but none made as much of a lasting impression. In her time off, she taught me the original game, but once the factory started picking up, that time off became increasingly scarce.

She started there sweeping floors, emptying trashcans. Standard janitorial duties, but she made her way up to production. For her, that meant manning the machines that sifted through and then superheated the sand to a pure molten glass. She worked in the hothouse of the factory, where the air was dark and dense and heavy and punctuated only by palm-sized smears of molten sand off to be shaped into colorful toys or shot glasses or scientific instruments.

She'd be gone at odd hours and have to call in on short notice, which Anne, my babysitter, never seemed to mind at least. That was the drudgery of shiftwork. She would come back exhausted and blank-faced. She'd complain about her bones hurting.

The factory shut down nine years ago. The company didn't make enough money, and the machinery was breaking down and too expensive to replace. Some scandal with the manager of the plant. Now it's just another shelled out building scattered in the dingy mist by the river. Kids have vandalized the place, blinded it by breaking its many multicolored windows.

Mom didn't mind. She managed to snag a retirement out of the deal. Many people weren't so lucky.

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I purge my way through the house. I thought my childhood bedroom would be the worst of it but everything, even down to the most inconsequential knick-knack, sets

me off on some nostalgic spiral. In the kitchen, I stare at a chipped mug for five minutes before remembering myself. The place has been steeping in the murk of my psyche for years. That explains the potency, which will fade shortly, once I douse it in lemon-scented polish and disinfectant.

The meeting. The meeting is at three. I count down the hours as I resuscitate the house. I've moved to the nook of the living room, wiped every surface with a wet rag, coming away with grey sludge, and I'm considering my options with the stacks of newspapers in the corner when she knocks politely.

Her name's Ms. Julia Perkins, and she wants to seduce the earth out from under my feet. I'm living on a gold mine.

Maybe something better than gold even. All forty-six acres of my great aunt's/aunt's/mother's/my property sit on top of the Utica shale formation. Utica: referring to the ancient city traditionally considered to be the first colony founded by the Phoenicians in North Africa. Utica: Marcellus' hot older sister, King Coal's demure daughter. She's the new star of natural gas, and, as Ms. Julia Perkins promises in her emails, she's going to make me and all of my neighbors into millionaires.

She arrives just on time. The sky is white and smoothed by a sharp wind that also clears the snow from the ground in knife gusts.

"We're just looking into mineral rights now," she says over the coffee I hastily brewed from what few grounds remained in the kitchen. Add to my to-do list: grocery shopping. I tally up priorities and shift things around as she gives me her pitch. "We're hoping to have a pipeline mapped by next spring, start building by the summer, and

you'll be earning even more after that." She smiles. She's older. Not as old as Mom. Blond. Under her puffy coat she wears a soft and expensive-looking sweater. Julia Perkins is the human equivalent of oatmeal.

"What company did you say you worked for again?"

"Mallory Energy. We've got a new satellite branch set up just over the hill there."

She points, now in business mode. "We're very excited to start negotiating with you, Autumn. Your mother was less than enthusiastic, but I can see you're different. Pragmatic is what I would call it." She gives me a conspiratorial smile, as if this is a secret, as if she doesn't say this to everyone, including my mother.

We talk until our mugs drain and then Julia writes a number in the margins of the contract and pushes it across the table to me. Something in my stomach tugs. I feel sick.

But I don't sign the contract that day. Julia leaves, winking as she goes, as if my hesitation were part of a skit we're playing to fool some invisible onlooker.

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"We're sorry; you have reached a number that is currently unavailable. If you would like to leave a message--"

I hang up. My mother is out of order. Her phone at least. And I don't know why I'm surprised. I clatter off a quick email about the meeting, a plea for advice thinly veneered with details of who said what and why. Hope all is well in New Mexico. By the end of my pleading, careful rewordings, I cannot tell if this parting line is my own

sentiment or a command for her. She hates being told to hope for things. Hates being told to do things in general. And so, I get to deal with them instead.

I send the message and snap shut my laptop with undue force. The contract jumps to focus, still there, innocuous as ever on the coffee table. I watch this intruder closely, like it could detonate. Any response from her will take a day at least, and I have no patience and no food to eat. I leave the contract where it is and attempt to take up my harried cleaning where I left it. After sustained but half-hearted effort to sort through an imposing stack of newspapers and other scraps, going to town is my only real option.

There's nothing else for it. I lock up the house and venture to the city. It's a twenty-minute drive to Newport from my house, shorter as the crow flies. We're close enough to hear distance popcorn percussions when the city lets off fireworks, but I've never caught a glance of their lights in the sky. From above, the Appalachian foothills look like wake waves rippling off something huge, just under the surface, and these ridges run parallel to Newport, separating it from the tiny municipality of Runner. Following the highway, I have to trace the topography, weaving, dipping and twisting as the hills see fit. This road was built before it became common practice to blow holes into the sides of mountains.

As such, I have plenty of time in my commute to consider my next steps. An on-going list compiles in my head. I need groceries, coffee specifically. I need basic things like laundry detergent. I need money to buy these things. I need to sell all of my old junk to get money. I need a job. I need to think of a way to handle Julia Perkins. I need my

mother. This last one resonates particularly. I need my mother because she would have the perfect rationalization for why the mineral rights contract belongs in a shredder. But I don't have her, so I need a stand-in. Anne White comes to mind. My old babysitter. A friend of my mother's since before I was born, Anne knew almost as much about her as my Aunt June.

Once upon a time Anne lived on Ash Ridge, not so far from us. Sometimes Mom had sudden shifts at work, and Anne was always first on the list to watch me in her absence. She never seemed to mind. Sometimes she'd take me back to her house, one of those premade things that factories glue together like gingerbread and ship in on trucks. We'd count the birds on her feeders in the back yard and try to identify them. Robins, often, and jays in the winter, crows too often, and once, after a very long rain, a Mourning Dove. With wings soft and gray as flakes of ash and a voice that sounded far away, even from the distance of a few yards, the mourning dove stuck with me the most out of everything.

Anne lives in town now, on a stamp-sized patch of land that barely accommodates her home. I redirect my route to pass by it. Then I surprise myself by parking across the street. Just scoping things out, I tell myself. When I left for college she gave me one of those insincere offers that people do. Come around any time. I mean any time. What would happen if I knocked on her door, right now? What sort of day would I be interrupting? Will she even know who I am? I get out and walk across the street.

What little yard she does have is festooned with winter baubles. She has a seasonal flag—snowflake for this month, and a stone goose on the front step, dressed in a cheap velvety parka. I count the holes in the concrete step, worn there by years of water dripping from the awnings. I'm looking for faces in the arbitrary arrangements of dots when she answers the door.

"Autumn," and she drags my name out too long with a downward lilt, into something tense, like a band poised to snap. Like I am a question. Aught, Uum? But Anne smiles. She's older. Imagine that. "It's been such a long time since I saw you. You can babysit yourself now, can't you?"

It's an awkward beginning to something. There are expectations, an empty craving for familiarity between two people who once knew each other when one was a child. Now two adults, how can they share that mutual affection? Adult acquaintances don't make a habit of playing together, of tickling touch, giggles, enforced naptimes.

I don't know how to handle it. So I treat her like a stranger, like a mine for information. This woman knows my mother better than I do. I want to know what she wants me to do. How do I make her happy enough that she'll answer or return my calls?

"How've you been, Autumn?" The reediness of her voice makes it sound more like, "What do you want?"

"I just got back in town yesterday, and I wanted to say hello." People do that here, right? "I hope you're not busy."

She's not. She invites me inside, even offering me tea.

This is a home I've never been in before, and the first thing I think is that this is the sort of place where people go to take piano lessons. That kind of house— small and tucked in on itself but also warm, filled with encouragements.

“Have a seat. How's your mother?”

I offer her the typical polite responses, hedging until the tea is ready, at which point the incongruity of the situation chips away the last of my resolve. I flood her living room with my concerns, the whole time fidgeting with the mug she gave me. It feels wrong to come home after so long and find very little has changed. Only the big things have. And then Mallory Energy hounding me as soon as I get back. God knows I need the money they're offering, but in my mother's eyes, even considering it might be unforgivable. By the end of it I don't even have the energy to experience shame at my emotional incontinence.

All the while, Anne sits beside me on her sofa, quiet, contemplative, but something about the sharpness around her eyes suggests she's sizing me up. We sit with all my now-insignificant-looking troubles laid out in front of us, until finally she says, “Maybe you need a break.”

Before I can scoff at her, because I am on a break—indefinitely—she goes on. “You just got back here. Things are happening fast. Take some time for yourself, do something you used to love doing. Jesus, I don't know, act like a kid again.”

I have enough self-respect to feel patronized, but also thankful, because I suspect in my coming here that I really was hunting down an excuse to be childish. It's

soothing to have your problems brushed off by other people as merely existential. And there was something else about it too, an honesty I needed.

Even if I'm not completely reassured, I don't let on to Anne. She has more important things to deal with I'm sure. But that doesn't stop us from wading through a few more social niceties. She asks about USH, as well-meaning people do, and I give her closed, soft answers.

It's not until I'm leaving, one hand on her doorknob, that she shows her fully honest side again. "And Autumn?"

I turn back. Maybe I forgot something on her sofa. But no. She's just standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed against the cold and looking more motherly than she ought to.

"Stay warm out there?"

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I decide to take her advice, and take advantage of the weak snowfall the next morning. I'm going to behave childishly. I'm going to build a snowman. I wrap up in my warmest clothes and pilfer through the house for the ingredients of my ritual, my snow effigy. Three buttons, mismatched, a handful of my marble collection, a carrot, bendy, sitting in the crisper for too long.

Outside, the snow is the opposite of ideal—powdery on top and frozen over just below that. I have no boots, only tennis shoes, and the brittle frozen layer of snow cuts into my socked ankles as I crunch through, step-by-step. Under this eggshell layer is the hard-packed snow that's been sitting around since late December. It's gray and

muddied, a breccia of ice and loose stones. The universe is trying to tell me something here. I don't listen, and instead risk the flesh of my wrists and ankles pummeling the snow into lumpy almost-spheres. The largest ball picks up all the junk buried in the snow, leaving behind a mottled trail, like a slug. I stack a smaller one and then a smaller one after that until I have a snowman that positively bristles in the dead air. This isn't childhood. This is something angry.

I ignore the signs, violently thumb in the buttons and marbles. Violently, a happy face. I've grafted two sapling branches into the mutilated torso when I hear footsteps creaking toward me from the road. I turn to find a familiar, if not welcome, face.

I don't remember Margie Swin as much as I remember her house. It was a trailer down by Runner Creek that her parents painted lime green when we were both five or six. Margie got to dip her hands in rainbows of paint and leave her handprints all over the trailer, and I was always so jealous of her when we drove by to get packages from the post office. They never delivered big packages— but we didn't mind going to get them so much because there were always fossilized suckers sitting in a dusty basket at the front desk. I never really spoke to Margie, maybe because of the house, maybe because a host of other things.

I don't think Mom wanted me to play with her, the only other kid who lived on the ridge. Without any neighbor children and no siblings, and never enough gas just to make trips into town for play dates, I had a lonely childhood. But it was alright. I had Mom to play with.

But now Mom is gone, and Margie is crunching through the layer of ice on top of the snow as she trudges toward me. She wears a scuffed leather coat, no gloves, and a fake fur muffler that droops over her ears. She trims her bangs in that angular style that was popular seven years ago. She wants something.

“Hey, Autumn! Long time with no see, huh?”

Just like that my mother’s shadow evaporates and I’m left with a soggy pile of snow. I’m in no mood. I need to disengage quickly. “Yeah, I haven’t been around for a while. College and everything.”

“Yeah that’s right, you’re our college girl.” Her resentment drips. “How’s that working out for you?”

“Taking a break for a while.” I leave it at that, even though it doesn’t even half fill the hollow air between us. I sniff, watch the toe of my shoe drag a ragged line through snow. No eye contact. People don’t make eye contact here. It’s too aggressive. I feel like I’m supposed to say something, like I’ve forgotten my line.

“How’s folks?” Folks could mean anyone— friends, family. Everyone’s got folks. Well, I’ve just got one around here.

“Good.” I repeat it again, twice, as if I need to convince myself. I hear my voice coming up from somewhere deep and waterlogged. “Yours?”

“They’re fine. My old lady’s working at the City Perk now. Likes it a lot.”

I can’t remember where Margie’s mom worked before, or even if she worked.

Pleasantry quota filled, she dives right the hell in. “Listen, the reason I came by is because folks were talking and saying you were in the house now. Everybody gets

worried winters when your mom goes and leaves the house empty. Anything could happen—frozen pipe, break-in...” Yeah Margie, just pretend you wouldn’t be the one who was doing the breaking. “You know. So it’s nice for somebody to look after it. Uh...used to be me, she’d ask. She’d give me twenty bucks to look after the place during winter and all.”

So she wants money, great. It’s not like I have much to start with. If I’m as noncommittal as possible, she might slink away. “Uh huh.”

“And also we had this deal, when it got warmer, I do the mowing, weed-eating, haul wood sometimes, you know...that sort of thing, and she’d give me a couple bucks for that too. I guess I just wanted to know, with you here now and everything, if that deal still stands. I don’t have your mom’s number or anything else I’d call her, so I hope you don’t mind me coming down here to ask.”

“No, no it’s fine. I don’t mind at all. I’m sure my mom is still interested. To be honest I’ve never been much good at yard work. Never cared for it at least. So that can be all yours once things start growing.”

Margie nods to herself and smiles halfway. I get a flash of her upper left incisor, twisted around so that it’s pointing at me. I remember when we were younger, she always stuck her tongue into the gap. Mom used to say that Margie could eat a corn cob through a keyhole with her tooth like that.

“I do driveways too,” she offers. “If you’re interested, you know if it needs shoveled or anything. She appraises the driveway, the serpentine lick of gravel, the steep grade. “You’ve got a beast but I could do it for twenty plus the cost of rock salt.”

Now she's pushing it. I want her to leave before she bargains me out of my home. "Ahh, nah, no thanks. I've got the four-wheel drive. It just walks on out without any trouble."

"That's fine then." She gnaws her bottom lip, rips away a strip of dead skin with her teeth, opening raw redness, pale blood slowing in to fill the space. Then, as if she just thought of it, she adds, "I heard that woman from Mallory has been talking to you. She's been talking to everybody up and down the ridge."

So here's the real reason for this conversation. I wouldn't have suspected it until this very moment, but now that it occurs to me, Margie wouldn't have hauled down here for any other reason. If she wanted my money, I'd walk outside one day to find her shoveling the driveway and demanding payment. She's determined like that. No, this is something different. She wants someone else's money.

I can't deny that Julia Perkins visited me. Margie wouldn't be here if she didn't already know, if someone hadn't already seen. I can guarantee that her Mallory Energy car is chiseled in the visual memory of most of the residents on this ridge. My neighbors will note her passing, pick over every possible destination, the potential outcomes. They'd fit well on Wall Street, the Pentagon, some giant chessboard somewhere. They can smell blood a mile off, my neighbors on Raise Ridge.

So I concede. "Yep."

And this is the opening that Margie has been waiting for the whole while, the one she's been chomping on the bit for since how's folks. "Rose wouldn't even open the door for her, so I bet that's a nice change for her."

“Doesn’t surprise me.” My hackles lift at the offhand familiarity. I preferred it when she was just my mom. The distance. My.

If Margie senses that she’s pissing me off, she doesn’t acknowledge. “So, you’ve been talking?”

“Yeah.” All I can think of is “talking” as that well-worn shorthand in high school, something akin to courting in the twenty-first century. Do you like him like him? Are you talking?

“Bet it’s going to be a pretty sweet deal for you. What have you got, forty acres?”

Again, she’s done her research, knows the exact acreage, knows the exact sum I would receive, but she won’t lay those cards on the table. “Forty-six.”

She nods. “That’s right. Well my cousins on Cantworth Ridge are buying a boat lot from what they got selling their mineral rights so I imagine you’re in pretty good shape, huh? And just think when they start fracking. We’re all gonna be a bunch of white trash millionaires, huh?”

Another toothy smile. Unbidden, I think of corncobs, doorknobs. My granny always called the people who lived on Cantworth Ridge, the Cantwashes. She’d call them that to their faces, but they didn’t mind much because it was true. They were all of them always up to their elbows in motor oil and red clay mud. Why wash when you’ll just get dirty again? There was one family on the ridge that raised a couple of wolf cubs in their basement. When I was younger, I could hear them making a ruckus, baying,

echoing through the hills. The DNR took the wolves away some years ago. I don't want to imagine the Cantworths as millionaires of any sort, white trash or not.

"I don't know, Margie. I haven't signed the contract with her yet. I don't know if I should."

Margie's mouth drops. "Should? Of course you should. Mallory's only going to drill if they get contracts from everybody. They want the whole parcel."

I can tell that parcel is a recycled word in Margie's mouth. I catch myself. Aren't all words recycled? But I'm already too wound up, all the things I've been thinking, all my hesitations, regurgitate. "What? Is selling your own mineral rights not enough? You need the millions? Wanna be the next Beverly Hillbillies? But you haven't even stopped to think what they'll do to this place." I cringe at my own self-righteousness. I've gone too far. Margie thinks so too.

"Look. You don't have to worry about money, not after you graduate and get a job somewhere in Timbuktu. But for the rest of us, this is huge. This could mean something. And after being shit on all my life, I think it'd be nice to go somewhere. I'd like to not have to mow lawns to make a living."

And what do I say to that? Where's the lie?

"Look, I know you don't think it's my business what you do. But it's everybody's business. And I get what you mean about the ridge. This place is important. But the people are more important. And these people, your neighbors, remember? They're not going to take too kindly to you keeping them from that money. Just something to think about."

Margie retreats back up the hill, her boots crunching in the iced-over snow. I could trail after her. I could pick up the daggers of ice that her boots break open. I could make something out of them. I could hurt someone. Instead I look down at the muddy lump of snow I was making into a snowman. I think about hunger, about the people on Raise Ridge. Their hunger for something more. My own.

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The days following weigh heavily. Winter eases off briefly, only to return with the rare spite of a February blizzard. It starts out as rain but quickly freezes, glazing tree branches and power lines and everything else with a wicked sharpness. A few miles past the house, a power line snaps under the weight of ice, and it takes a day for the power company to brave the unmanaged roads to restore power.

The whole while, I'm alone, stewing in the emptiness and the futility of the house. I made this promise to myself: when I came home I would get a job immediately, whatever I could get. Even before arriving home, I nudged out a few tenuous feelers. A lumber and flooring company needs a sales associate. A local Internet provider needs a telemarketer. The fast-food companies always need new blood. I expected modest prospects. What I didn't expect was the scarcity. In my absence, I forgot how there really is nothing here in the way of a livelihood. I sent in my admittedly anemic resume without really understanding that I was competing with potentially dozens of other people for a minimum wage full-time, maybe even part-time job.

I receive no requests for interviews, no indication at all that I applied for any job. None at all. With increased frenzy as the blizzard passes and the roads thaw, I scan local

job searches, the bulletin board, the classifieds, for something, anything, that doesn't require a degree.

Unbidden, my gaze darts to a point across the living room. The contract Julia Perkins left now lives on the bottom of the bookshelf. That number she scribbled in the margins waits, quietly and unassumingly, for me to acknowledge its existence. Maybe three minutes pass in this one-woman stare-down. My wrists twitch with some unnamed compulsion, and I'm about to do something reckless when my browser pings, alerting me to a new email.

But of course it's not a potential employer drawing me away from temptation. It's my mother, asking me how the house held up in the storm. This is her way. She keeps tabs on the weather as if that's the same thing as keeping tabs on me. I wonder, sometimes, if she realizes that just because she named me after a season doesn't mean I am the weather. Perhaps the difference is negligible. I press out a distracted reply before hauling myself up and out of the living room, making my way to my own room. Tomorrow, once the roads have definitely cleared, I will go to town and sign up for unemployment until I can secure something stable. But for now, I'll make good on my commitment to sell all the irrelevant crap I dragged home from college. It's cathartic, logging item by item into the bulletin board, holding things up to the dim light, judging their worth. Mini-fridge versus textbooks. Kitschy wall art versus desk lamp. I continue in this rhythm.

My resolve settles. Everything is for sale.

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It's midevening when it happens. I'm brewing coffee and sifting through some of my old childhood junk that I might be able to sell to Old Man Rivers for some grocery money, when I hear the sound, the shriek of hot twisting metal. This sound could be mistaken for a gust of particularly terrible wind, a gust so heavy and strong that it's peeling back the doors to the barn, that's happened before in the terrible summer storms. I catch the whiff of heavy smoke, the smell of wet burning wood.

I scramble from my nest in the floor of the kitchen and rush to the front door, swinging around the threshold to see the night is on fire. And the barn, across the acre yard, is a boiling orange-red furnace.

I watch for a long time, longer than I should before I'm back in the house in a minute, dialing 9-1-1. Just remain calm. But they say the fire has already been reported. A dispatch is on its way. Of course it's already been reported. It's lighting up the whole damn valley and Cantworth Ridge on the other side. I bet good money you can see the glow even down at the Runner post office. Everybody's watching. Everybody is always watching.

With shaking hands I pull on my boots and my old coat. I keep my phone with me, because I'm sure I'll be getting calls soon, and as a second thought, I walk back to the kitchen and turn off the coffee machine.

I should rush out, see if there's anything I can do. But that's just foolish. So I get a spot on the front porch and watch the embers twirl into the sky, thankful at least, that it didn't have to be the house. I wait for the dispatches to arrive.

The volunteer fire department from Buckrun arrives first, only a few seconds after I get settled. A few silhouetted figures jump out and guide the truck down the driveway. I wonder, distantly, if they'll ever be able to get their heavy trucks back up. But that isn't my biggest worry right now. While two silhouettes finished guiding the truck and start to reel out the firehouse, one detaches from the group and moves in my direction. I stand to meet whoever it is halfway.

I am guided back to the truck to answer questions, to be handed an ugly pilled orange blanket because I am probably in shock. I'm not the thing on fire but I'm sluiced with questions, heavy as water. Is there anything alive in the building? Pets, livestock? Nothing. Are there any gas lines around or leading to the building? No. Any power lines? Anything powered by electricity? No. Any loaded guns or ammunition in or around the building? No. Any other incendiaries? Probably a couple of gas cans, yeah. That's all he has for me right now. Other dispatches will be arriving shortly. If I could stay away from the driveway and just stay here close to the back of the truck, that would be a great help. Thanks.

Alright. What's your name again? Autumn. There are words after that. Salvage. Optimistic. Salvage again. Is there anything they should try to salvage?

When I was eight and we were carrying boxes up to the barn I found a ragweed growing in the back corner. The darkest, driest corner. It was a ragweed, but not like one I'd ever seen before. This was an alien thing, ugly, never saw the sun before. It was stunted, reedy, and an eerie white, the color of exposed bone, and inexplicably alive. This godawful little weed managed to live without sunlight, adapting to the lack,

conserving its green for some better time, hopeful, stretching upward to nothing. But it didn't know that. Autumn. It didn't understand the nothing. It didn't know it would grow old. Autumn. Would die.

“Autumn.”

I look up.

“Is there anything important in the barn?”

“No, nothing.”

A parade of chili pepper red engines crackle down the drive, the dark muted figures in the melting crystalline night. The sounds of hard water beating against hissing metal, organized shouting, the crunch and creak of many boots in snow. In the end, there was nothing to save, just a flame to quench. It was like a ballet, a parade, the thick heavy hoses, the firefighters lined up along them. They came from everywhere in the county, even some from across the river. But in the end, there was nothing. There was paperwork to sign in my exhausted state, with instructions to contact insurance tomorrow. After I got some rest. I had to return the ugly orange blanket eventually.

The next morning, when the valley next saw sunlight, the barn had been transformed into something that wasn't a barn. Sparkling, cruelly crystalline, beautiful and delicate as spun sugar. Sugared over with permafrost. Twisted and shimmering and dark. ice-glazed. The wind had twisted the dripping rivulets of ice into fantastic spires and buttresses. An ice palace that melted in the midday sun.

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The narrative of my life has always been to leave, the idea pushed into me from a young age. Do well in school, Autumn. Work hard. Make good grades and go to college, and then get paid doing something you love, Autumn. It was never an option for me to stay here.

I was never allowed that narrative. And after a lifetime of being turned away from it I can't say that I want it so badly. It's not of interest to me. But now, even in my home, even the land has become weaponized against me, as if there is an underlying current, a thrum beating up from the ground. Leave Autumn leave Autumn leave Autumn leave. Am I not welcome here? I lie in bed paralyzed by my thoughts, staring and tracing pictures in the cottage cheese ceiling and I think: god, the lengths people will go to in order to fuck themselves over.

I peel myself from the mattress. I force myself to wake up, to drink coffee, to immerse myself in the minutiae. The insurance company wants a list of anything valuable that might have been lost. They want a dozer waiting on the property so it can smudge this out as soon as the police finish their investigations. Things to sign, promises to make. I don't want to do this on my own. I call Mom three times over the next two hours even though I don't know what I'm going to say when she answers. Hey Mom, the barn burned down and destroyed everything inside! Hope there wasn't anything important! Margie says hi!

I feel jumpy and defensive. I feel like I've been told to explain myself.

I've just settled down to compose a stilted email when someone knocks. The cursor blinks tauntingly in the blank message, but I leave it for the door.

The first thing I see is the badge.

“Ms. Harmon, I’m officer Latier with the James County Police Department. My colleague and I are here to determine the probable cause of the fire two nights ago. May we come in?”

You don’t say no to questions like that. The living room is cramped with three people who don’t know each other. It has to accommodate three wide personal bubbles. I sit across from the officer, Latier, and the other, the colleague. Latier is an older woman, several years older than Mom. The decoration on her uniform tells me she holds seniority in the department, that she could have chosen not to go out into the field, that she chose to anyway. Something about her stance on the couch, leaning forward on her knees, suggests deep interest in the case. The other looks familiar, and I suspect I saw him two nights ago manning one of the water stations attempting to extinguish the barn. He’s less frantic now. More Somber.

They waste no time with pleasantries. Initial investigation shows that the barn didn’t spontaneously combust. Surprise. Another line of questioning. Do I have any enemies? What about my mother? Did I see any suspicious activity? What was I doing at the time of the blaze? They walk me through the site, still cordoned off with yellow tape, and point out the spot where the fire was likely started. The back right corner, which is out of sight of the road and the front windows of the house. It’s likely someone doused the foundation timbers with gasoline and tossed a match. The spread pattern suggests that at least. The match would be long gone of course. Whoever it was, they

didn't use the two gas cans that were already inside the barn, though those certainly helped the spread. My stomach curdles with the word "arson."

They'll continue the investigation. Latier says, as if I couldn't figure it out for myself, this kind of thing is deadly serious and they will press charges if they find the culprit. I say I can't make any decision without my mother. This place doesn't belong just to me. They leave me with the promise that they'll be in contact with the insurance company. Making a claim for arson is much different from accidental fire damage. More hoops to jump through.

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I follow my mother along a barely familiar path. It's been years since I've followed it, but now as I pass the burned out shell of the barn I can't understand why it's taken me so long to follow it again.

I can see her walking ahead of me, and I plod after her, though I'm much smaller. My stumpy little legs have trouble making it through the icy snow. I have to tilt my body side to side to anchor myself away from the anchor of the slush. I'm eager as I follow her. Up the driveway. No be very quick and very sneaky Autumn. We're ducking under the barbed wire fence into the neighbor's cow pasture. Careful on the barbs Autumn. But I'm fascinated with the barbs that are crystallized with ice. We don't have to be so quick about it either. Sure, we're on the main road but nobody ever passes by in weather this bad, and the neighbor lives far away in Florida where I've never been, only comes back to tag calves in the early summer and sell the meat stock. These aren't dairy

cows. I always cried when I saw the trailer stopped at the road collecting the cows that would come back as packages of meat.

Mom never thought anything of it to trespass onto their land. Prime hiking, she said. And the hiking on our land was good too, but Mom always said that this land lead to somewhere special.

As we walked the cows sometimes would follow us and we'd yank up clover bits and laugh as their long tongues bobbed to snatch greens from our hands, their tongues were strong and slimy and rough and they left green saliva on my palms.

Nothing cleaner than a cow's mouth, Mom would say. All they eat is grass.

On our way through our walk, she would lead me to one of my favorite places on Earth. You could reach Raise Ridge Cemetery from two routes. You could follow along the main road and take a fork to the left by the Methodist church. Or you could take the path I'm taking now, one that's not used much anymore, so that the woods have come in to reclaim it in some spots. It winds up the hill on the other side, and looking back behind you, you could see the valley laid out behind you, all picturesque like it was on a tub of butter or something. That's the way I'm going.

But either way you'll find an oval patch of land at the top of the hill that is perimetered by a rusty chain link fence. A cinder block building about five by five wide stands unassumingly in the corner of the clearing. Sparse gravestones populate the rest of the open space.

These were my people. Harmons and Swins and Cantworths and for generations back. Granny told me stories about them. Old Speck Swin, who you might find digging

ginseng on your land if you weren't watchful. She always said you could call Speck anything but Late For Supper. And she'd tell stories her own mother told. Like Eliza Cantworth, who breastfed a babydoll from the day her first and only child died stillborn to the day she died herself. And the baby rested next to her. Never named. "Baby Cantworth" was stamped out in black ink on nondescript aluminum plaque. This is what you got if you couldn't afford a real headstone. They both died before 1910. They'd never heard of world war. Didn't know what penicillin was. But they knew this same hill just as well as I do. It staggers me, sometimes, to think about how permanent the earth is. And impermanent just the same.

A few million years and the dirt under my feet will have worn down into clay and sand. Someone could build a sand castle out of me, or dig me up and burn me for light.

When I was little that's what I would think of when we walked up to visit Granpop's grave. I pictured someday meeting him as something else. Mom listened silently, patiently, and I trounced among the lichened stones. Lots of open room, but some places had little stone squares marking them. People looking ahead, Mom explained.

I follow her shadow up the path now, interrupting spiders' webs, startling birds from the trees. The cattle aren't in sight, though they make their presence known with a far-off lowing. Now more than ever, this path knows few people. It's going to its own sort of grave.

Soon, the gate I open will rust over until it can't open. And the committee that oversees maintenance will take five years to decide that no, nobody will be coming that

way anymore. They'll replace that spot with new chain link. The only new chain link for fifty years. And the fact that my Granpop's hands and my mother's hands and my hands opened that gate won't mean anything. It will be gone, and the path with it. Left for no one but the cows with their clean mouths.

The last snow has melted away with warm heavy rain. Spring has this certain smell to it. Something like wet dirt. Clean wet dirt.

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. Officer Latier got all the evidence she wanted yesterday I guess, because the police tape is gone finally. Which means I can go in and work on what the insurance agent asked me to do. I need to take an inventory of any valuable property in the barn, to see what and how much they'll cover. I could've told her nothing, which would've been the truth, but that wouldn't look well when it's arson and the insurance on the barn is worth more than the building and its contents combined.

I need something to distract me, so I pull on a semi-clean sweater and my tennis shoes, and I tromp out to the thing that was the barn. Insurance wants an inventory as soon as possible. Then they'll make their offer. I can't promise them anything good. No antiques or hidden masterpieces. But maybe something of value to me if not them. A part of me just wants to find junk.

The wind against the remaining timbers triggered a slow collapse of the walls over the past day, so the innards of the barn are laid bare now, like something gutted. The whole place stinks of wet ash and soggy wood.

I approach with these things in mind, decide to section it off into four corners and systematically rifle through what I can find. I start with that back right corner facing away from the road, where this all began, and pluck my way through icy debris. Most of the junk in here was just that. Junk. Old stuff from when my great aunt owned the place and actually attempted to run a farm on the land. Ancient plows, two ramshackle stalls in the back, a giant tractor wheel filled with muck where mosquitos built a nursery. None of this is worth saving. Cardboard boxes take up most of the rest of the space, flaked away to a crisp by now with the heat and the ice and the wind. This will be what's worth looking at. We dumped these boxes when we moved in. If memory serves correctly it's mostly my old baby clothes and papers from elementary school. Mom never kept anything of herself.

I pick my way over a fallen timber and sink my fingers into the first promising box I see. What's left of it pries open limply, no fight to it. I am an archeologist and must be careful not to break what I touch. Inside pages, lots of them but all blurred and swollen with water and ash. They all cling together, and whatever was written or drawn there is gone now to some other place. Erased. Garbage.

I work my way from one edge of the barn to the next, digging low and high where it's safe, but it all goes the same way. The fire destroyed nearly everything, save for some pilld baby clothes that I couldn't even fit my foot into now.

What will she think? What will she do when she sees that it's all lost? But then I wonder if she'll even come back at all. She keeps putting it off.

This is heavy work, and by the time I'm halfway finished, I'm a cold sweat covered in bits of burned things. The little legal pad in my back pocket is unsurprisingly stark. Pieces of old farm equipment worth more as scrap but I pulled them out anyway. A couple saddles that have rotted from the underbelly but they might be something to a leather worker. There's nothing here to claim. Just memories. There have been enough anguished writers pondering the monetary value of a memory for me to leave it. It's not something I want to think about right now. My back aches from leaning over. I straighten up, scrub at my brow and shiver a white cloud into the blackened air. I want to give up.

That's when I see it, a clunky white pillbox of a thing in the far corner from where the blaze started, where the damage was the least. It's about as tall as my knees, and it's positively pristine. It looks like some old greasy blankets covered it and spared it from most of the ash. I stare at the thing and compose a careful route through the wreckage, looping past old explorations.

What I find under the smoke-greased blankets is a fire-safe, nearly untouched by the wreckage around it. I step back and consider it. I've never seen it before, but that doesn't count for much, as I can't remember the last time I was up here, even before school. It could have been here all along, or it could only be months old. One thing is certain: it's got to have something valuable in it, which means I need to find some way to open it.

As it turns out, it's relatively light when I try to lift it. So bricks of precious metal have been ruled out as potential content. I lug it out of the wreckage and inside, where I

place this new project in the kitchen, the only open space in the house that will be large enough. A sliver of me considers contacting Mom about this find, as she will certainly know how to get into it. But she will also certainly forbid me from opening it if it's something I shouldn't see, and right now I don't want to listen to her. So in lieu of a mother, I take to the fire safe with a crowbar, and with a few less-than delicate maneuvers, I've busted off one of the hinges. I pry my way inside to find the least likely object I could image.

A children's book. Are You My Mother? The first book I ever read on my own. I lift it from the box and flip open the cover. It's not even that smoky, and I trace carefully crayoned letters on the title page, my own letters denoting the date and my name to mark the significance of this object. Literacy. I thought we'd lost it in one of our many moves, but here it is, inexplicably, in a fire safe that I never knew existed.

But the book isn't alone. There are other things. Things more official. I think manila envelope, sealed shut with wax, and underneath that—Jesus Christ.

A handgun.

Of all the things I might have guessed to be in this safe, a gun wouldn't have even been on the list. Mom doesn't do guns. She doesn't do violence in general. She refuses to even kill the occasional wayward spider in our house, opting instead to carefully cup it and place it in the garden out back.

I know nothing about guns, have no way of determining what it is or if it's a licensed, legal weapon. I do note, with some small relief, that there's no extra

ammunition in the safe. Otherwise the heat would have set it off and blown everything else inside straight to hell.

With no way to compute this information, I decide to store it away for thought at another time. The manila envelope beckons. I slide a finger under the wax, risking the skin under my nails, and gut it. A handful of polaroids fall out, but they may as well be entrails.

These are photographs of my mother, but the more I look at them, the less familiar she becomes. Mom, young, surrounded by strangers, maybe the group of friends Aunt June told me about. Mom, in hiking boots, stretched out as she and some man rip down a Commercial Property For Sale sign. As she bends, her shirt lifts and exposes a mark on her right hip. A rose tattoo. She hates tattoos. Mom, with five others, crouched in front of some kind of power plant, handkerchiefs over their mouths. She holds a hacksaw, while a woman to her left brandishes wire cutters. The woman is Anne. Mom, holding a gun. Mom, trespassing. Mom, breaking the law. And always surrounded by these strangers, apart from that one familiar face.

On back of each photo, in her handwriting, a scrupulous account. Time and date, location, the full names of each person, and beside these a list of nonsense words that must be aliases. My mother is "Roswell." Anne is "Cash."

I toss the polaroids away from me, onto the kitchen floor, flinching back like they're burning.

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My mother never belonged to me. I learned this the hard way, the way of a child who must realize that the person who was always around, who gave everything and did everything, was not, in fact, a part of the child. Was, in fact, their own separate person. It's chilling. It's truncating. It's amputating.

I remember the storybook. I used to love it. I had her read it over and over. Are You My Mother? A little lost songbird and a smoke-coughing machine that's sure to crush it. The baby bird convinced that this wheezing metal monstrosity is its mother. It hadn't said it wasn't after all. But of course, before the baby is crushed to death, mother flies to the rescue and they nestle safely together in their nest. I remember reenacting the plot with household objects. Vacuums and cupboards and dishrags and various other domestic items. Are You My Mother? Are You My Mother? Are You My Mother?

I feel the same way now, except the question has changed, if only slightly. I'm chasing a hologram. A person who existed once, these photographs show, but now?

I find myself asking. Is My Mother You?

I have this conviction, a crazy one maybe, that if I discover who this person is, the one in the photographs, I can make a sacrifice. Line them up in the right order or pattern, and I can conjure my mother. My mother. Not the one then, not the one now, but the one who lived in between, when I was young and hers and unconcerned.

It was a blurrier time, I was more easily bruised but also less likely to understand when I was being lied to. I flip back to that photo with the hacksaws and that stretch of skin on her hip with the tattoo. Rose. Rose Harmon. Who gets their namesake sunk in

their skin? Who breaks into government property with a hacksaw? Someone who owns herself.

No, My mother never belonged to me.

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The sun is setting before I sort out any way to address whatever it is that I've learned. Hours of mindless self-torture and the solution has been obvious all along. I'll get an explanation from someone involved. I peel up the driveway and set out for Newport. Anne has given me information before, and she will give it to me again, even if that means I need to put some of these photos to good use. The envelope slides back and forth in the passenger seat, a dry and skittering rhythm as I navigate the bends in the road. After a while it becomes maddening, and I let this fuel my resolve. By the time I make it to Anne's house, I'm fuming.

It's fully dark when I arrive, and I can't imagine who she pictures at the door as I pummel it. Certainly not me. I start talking as soon as a sliver of light appears in the threshold.

"What the hell is this?" It's the photo taken in front of the power plant. I flutter it in her face.

The silence doesn't last as long as I expected.

"I've been wondering where that was." She opens the door wider, stepping back.

"Come in. We need to talk. Tea?"

"No, I don't want tea. I want an answer to my question. What is going on here?"

"Please, have seat."

I sit, bristling.

“Were there any other photos with that one?”

“I’m not telling you anything until I get some of my own answers.”

Anne lifts the corners of her mouth, only slightly, and blinks down at the picture, which I’ve tossed on the table between us. Somewhere, deeper in the house, a clock whittles out the time. “That sounds like a ‘yes’ to me.”

But I keep my face impassive, determined not to let her fish anything out of me. After a prolonged standoff, she concedes, sighing.

“We were kids. We were bored. Haven’t you ever broken the law before, just for fun?”

I realize now that I should have brought a more incriminating picture, one she couldn’t brush off as reckless youth. “What about trespassing on government property with a gun? Is a felony offense also just bored kids having fun?”

She smiles again. “Now that is a different animal entirely, isn’t it?” She presses her index finger down onto her own face in the photograph, sliding the evidence back and forth, almost hypnotically. “We’re part of a group, a protest group. When someone does something that isn’t right, we sabotage them.”

“You’re using present tense.”

“Yes.”

“So you’re doing it. Still.” I would feel foolish being so obtuse, but the image simply doesn’t compute. Not Anne, who decorates her yard for even the most obscure holidays. Not my mother, whose greatest ambition is to grow her own tomatoes.

If Anne finds this line of questioning amusing, she doesn't show it. Instead, she is all business. "How did you find these pictures, Autumn?"

I relay the story to her with some details obscured. I choose not to say anything about the children's book. It's too personal to share with her, and it doesn't matter in the larger scheme of things anyway.

After that, all the violence evaporates out of me. "I just, god, I just want to understand what's going on with her."

"Fine. You want to understand your mother I'll have to show you in person. But in return, I want those photos you found. All of them."

I hesitate. It doesn't seem wise to throw away my one big bargaining chip, especially since I can't be sure if Anne will hold up her end.

"Well?"

"You show me whatever it is you want to show me, and then I'll give them to you."

"Fair enough." She stands and pockets the picture. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Does it matter?" Of course it doesn't. I'll go wherever she takes me at this point, my need to know is so great.

She disappears to a back room and returns with a black canvas bag. "Come on. I'll fill you in on the way."

--

The whole way there I'm jittery. This is stupid. This is stupid and this can only end badly. There's a rucksack sitting between Anne and me, filled with the supplies. I didn't look through it when she tossed it to me.

We park in the church lot at the end of the ridge, by the stump of a tree and the power line that made the tree into a stump. We'll hoof it the rest of the way, not wanting her vehicle associated with this night in any way. This is nothing new for Anne, I can tell. She parks in the very back corner, where an overgrown hibiscus half obscures the lot, and takes care to face her plates away from the road.

I start out onto the hot patch pavement but she calls me back immediately.

"Taking the road will get us caught in a minute. We'll cut up the side of the ridge through Arthur Cantworth's property."

I don't know much about Arthur Cantworth, but I know his family, and I know that if one of them caught us on their property without permission, they'd come at us with a gun.

"Here, take this," and she hands me a black ski mask.

I want to double over with vertigo. This is surreal. And happening. The mask is wooly, too heavy for this weather, and I can already feel it constricting my breath and sealing in the heat and the fear. I lift it hesitantly.

"Not now. Put it on later once we get close. The last thing we want is to be found walking through private woods at night wearing ski masks.

Maybe an owl spots us on our trek to the site, but not much else, and by the time Anne halts in front of the chain links fence at the perimeter of the property, my

initial nerves have faded. I pull on the mask and something in my head clicks on. Every step springs just a bit more than usual, and the night air whips through me, thickening my blood with oxygen and sharpening every edge. Even the smallest blades of grass, the simplest shift of leaves is perceived with incomparable clarity.

I'm studying the diamond pattern the chain link shadows cut into the ground with Anne takes out the wire cutters and expertly clips an opening into the property. She holds the fence back for me as I duck under.

"Here, take this." Anne exchanges the wire cutters for a more familiar, unexpected shape.

"Sugar?" I heft the soft-edged bulk bag. This seems too domestic to hurt anyone, and maybe that's the point.

"For the company vehicles. A few shakes into the tanks will ruin the engines."

I look to the parking pad on the other side of the lot, the sugar now heavy in my hands, and picture myself turning around. Now. Just ducking through the fence and waiting by the car until Anne finishes her business here. I've seen enough, haven't I? All I wanted was to see, to know what it was my mother did (does?), and now I've done it.

I step back while Anne peels off from me to the main building. I step back again until the chain link presses into my shoulders. To retreat now, to hotfoot it back down the ridge and wait in Anne's car while she finishes her business. It would be so easy.

It would be exactly what my mother would expect me to do. Anne's noticed my hesitation and she stills, arms held loosely at her sides, waiting for me to decide. Her relaxed posture suggests that this is also what she expects of me. I'm so close to

discovering something, though I don't know what it is. But it requires sacrifice. It requires the crossing of a line.

I run the consequences through my head. I don't know what all the pouring of this sugar will make me. A vandal, certainly. An accessory, perhaps, to much larger things, acts like those my mother kept as photographs in a fire safe. Arrest. Prison. Felony? My blood pushes faster just under the surface of my skin, reminding me that I am a body as well as a mind. I am a body holding a bag of sugar, already trespassing, already halfway there, and it would be more difficult to turn back than it would be to keep moving forward. Another truth registers. If I don't do it now, I will never allow myself to get this close again. How many years will have to pass before I stop wondering what might have been? Maybe all of them. I'm in denial. All I can think about is Mom and that infuriating saying—do as I say and not as I do. But I have to know. I have to know.

So I fortify my resolve and steal my way to my target, careful to keep in the shadows as much as I can, headed woodenly for the parking area. Perhaps I am a marionette. Who holds the strings? I locate the gas cap to the first car, some kind of SUV with the Mallory logo printed on the side. I've flipped back the cap and used my thumb to punch a hole into the sugar bag when a spray paint can rattles from nearby.

The hiss of the spray paint and the hush of the sugar slipping from the bag stir the air into an oddly pleasant sibilance. And I guess this is the sound of rebellion, a kind of low sustained whisper. I move from one car to the next until the sugar runs out, and I turn to see Anne's handiwork on the side of the building.

Stop Contracts Now. No Compromise In The Defense Of Mother Earth.

The phrase registers something familiar in the back of my mind, but I can't quite place where it belongs.

"This is just a warning," Anne says. "It's a message telling them to stop, and a promise that if they don't we'll do worse."

I want to ask who we is, but I know Anne will be reticent. Merely bringing me here, letting me witness her vandalizing and destroying public property, is a huge risk on her part. I could easily report her without incriminating myself, but I suspect that at least some of the trust she invests in me stems from my mother. As if, by virtue of my lineage, I have a right, even a responsibility, to these things. Maybe I do. Ideology, if not heredity, has this uncanny way of rooting in early, surreptitiously, and growing undetected until it blooms in the most inconvenient and unexpected ways.

Case in point: I'm trespassing on private property in the dead of morning with my old babysitter, destruction-minded. Not long ago, I was well on my way to a bachelor's degree and a government-endorsed document vouching for my obedience and successful assimilation into polite society.

I look to Anne to gauge her reaction. My work is done, as is hers. Now, do we just leave?

"Not yet," and it's like she's reading my mind. "A few compromised engines won't get the point across. We need to show them we're serious. And that's when she takes out the crowbar. "Since it's your first sabotage. I'll let you do the honors."

"Honors of what?"

“Busting the place. Whatever you want.”

I hesitate as the offer. Somehow, this is more real than just sugaring a tank. Someone else will be turning those engines, and by the time they do I'll be far away. At this point, I could almost pretend that I had nothing to do with it. But this crowbar is something concrete. I put my hands on this, and they'll come back red. I try to picture myself swinging it into something satisfyingly friable, punching a hole through a windshield, shattering a window, and I can't.

“Go on. Take it.”

It's this solid matte black thing. It would be heavier than it looks. It would fit nicely in my hand, working just like a natural extension of my arm and I blundered it into somebody else's property.

I shake the vision from my head. I couldn't. “I shouldn't.”

I can't see much of Anne's face through the mask, can't gauge her reaction to this coping out, but something about the way her shoulders shift tells me that I failed her test.

She doesn't say anything on it, though, just turns back to the building with vigorous strides, knocking out one window in a single effortless swing. She isn't even really looking when the bar connects with the glass. There's a haphazard practice to the motion, like she's done it many, many times before. And she has. Then the next one out. Then the next one. I trail behind, coltishly, watching her blind the place, and between fragments of glass are flashes of other things from a long time ago. A mourning dove on a dripping power line. A glob of premade cookie dough in my toddler fist. My mother's

car disappearing up the driveway in the late evening, blurred through my tears because she was leaving so suddenly, at such a strange time.

Something slides into place, realigning memories that I could never make sense of until now. This is where she was always going. Not to work, like she said. Not on an inescapable errand, like she said. She was off Defending Mother Earth.

I don't like epiphanies. They're suspicious and more often than not, too convenient. But all the way around the property and back down the ridge and into the cab of Anne's car, I'm lining up my perceptions from the past twenty-two years along this new edge. I find a picture that makes sense, despite any wishes I might have in the contrary. This one piece, and so much of my confusion clears, so many disparate artifacts, that firebox in the barn being one of them. Her inexplicable absence now, when maybe I need her the most, being one of them.

Anne neglects the headlights until we reach the highway, at which point she assumes a breakneck speed, wasting no time getting away from the scene of the crime. I'm a criminal now. Anne's a criminal. She's been one. And my mother.

"She did this?"

Anne doesn't take her eyes from the vacant road. Only truckers on their way to other places are ever out at this time of night. Anything could be at the side of the road, just past that blue-white wedge of light we push along the median line. Tree trunks, sandstone outcrops, blank-faced exit signs swing past in gray alien impressions.

"Yeah. Did it. Does it. Came up with it. It's one of the things she brought back from New Mexico."

“She’s in charge?” I hug myself over the seatbelt strap.

“Was. Until she skipped town this year. You can guess why.”

“Someone is looking for her.”

“Not just someone. The feds don’t like terrorists. Terrorists. That’s what we are to them.”

My mother, leader of a terrorist cell.

“What have you done?” I don’t know how I mean it when I ask, only that I want answers. I want to know what my mother did to be gone, right now, and I want it to be worth it.

“I can’t tell you that. Letting you in on this was a big enough risk. You’re hardly initiated.” Something about the set of her mouth changes and she slows as the town exit nears. “We can talk more once we get back to my house.”

Anne keeps her promise. We rouse her home from its three a.m. silence with brewing tea. I can’t stop thinking. My mother used to be one of these people. She’s notorious, in fact. How did she do that? How did she manage to fight this war and never breathe a whisper of it to me? How did she hide so well?

My mother was everything to me. Except herself.

We’re drinking tea now, in Anne’s kitchen. An hour ago we were destroying public property but now I’m drinking tea with here while the sugar in the tank dissolves slowly, something festering.

There’s one big thing I have to know. I won’t leave without knowing. “Did she kill anybody?”

“Jesus, Autumn, what kind of people do you think we are?”

But I just lift my chin at her, resolved to keep my expression hard until she gives me a straightforward answer. And I hate it because I don’t know for certain what the answer could be. I don’t know what kind of people they are, what kind of person my mother is. I’ve never kept my face this still for so long. My lower lip wants to tremble, because it’s all actually hitting me now. What I did. What she did.

I’m flushing with it. Fury, at I don’t know what, maybe at my inability to even control my own lip, let alone my life. Maybe at my mother, the terrorist, the liar, the absentee. The murderer?

“Hey.” Anne’s tense, like she’s snapping me out of something. “Nobody is dead because of Rose. Not even she could be that hard. Her being gone is only a precaution. The feds have been sniffing around ever since Mallory started buying up leases last year. You weren’t around, but there was quite a fuss about the new pipeline they’re planning. A lot of protests. Two suits from the bureau started contacting protesters, with some bullshit line about ‘trying to learn about the movement.’ People started wondering why Rose refused to lease. She decided it would be a good idea to get out of town until the pressure eases off a bit.”

“Do they know who she is?”

Her face pinches. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“I’ll be honest with you. She wasn’t as discreet as she should have been when that Perkins woman came around. I wouldn’t be surprised if she made a report on Rose’s...vehemence.”

We stare at our tea dregs together and she spills out the manila envelope I brought to her once we got back. My side of the bargain paid. The photographs again, this time with context.

“This was blackmail,” she explains. “Rose made sure everyone knew, if anyone snitched, everyone would go down. Does wonders for solidarity.”

“Wow.” My mother is Machiavelli.

“Rose doesn’t take prisoners.”

I look over the note again, then to the spread of polaroid-faded faces.

“What are you going to do with them?”

“Burn them. It’s the safest way. And you call me if those people contact you about contracts”

I don’t like the sound of that. “What are you going to do to them?”

Anne doesn’t make eye contact, just swirls the dregs around in her cup. “That’s up for them to decide.”

I take that as my queue to leave, not certain I would have it in me to pass on that information, but entirely certain that I wouldn’t let on if I came to that decision. With that, I take my leave.

I buckle myself into my junk car that’s worth more as scrap than as itself and I ponder home. I can’t sleep. A combination of the tea and the adrenaline.

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It takes five days for Julia Perkins to call me, wanting to schedule another meeting. Nothing about her tone of voice communicates stress. This is just a business call. Nothing unusual at all has happened in the past week. I want to warn her. I want to tell her to never call me again, but I know that the key to getting out of this situation is to pretend that everything is normal on my end. It's four in the afternoon when she arrives the next day.

I at first don't recognize her, as she is obviously not driving her company car. I watch through a pinched curtain as she heaves herself from her car.

Her car, her own personal car, is nice enough. A slick greenish-brown thing with four doors. She has a pine tree air freshener on the rearview mirror. I bet she's the type of person who doesn't let people eat in her car. No fossilized french fries for her.

Then I'm inundated. The hush of sugar slipping from a bag. The dull snap of wire cutters. My hot breath pasted sticky onto my lips behind the ski mask. The way the humid air clung underneath my eyelids. But she doesn't know it was me. She can suspect. But really my motive is flimsy. There's no logical reason why I would have been the one to destroy her car.

And I think about that a lot. What would my mother think?

Three smart knocks on the door and I'm compelled to answer. She's likeable, if unbearable. How can these two poles exist in one person?

I open the door.

“Good afternoon.” I’m used to this strange pleasantry now, and the formality of it. I offer a half-open door.

“Hi. Can I come in?” But she’s already half through the door. Her voice flat. Her posture deflated.

I want anything but for her to come in, but I’m also curious. I step back, concede. “Sure thing. Coffee? Water?”

“No, no thanks. Let’s talk.”

I don’t want to talk. I want to distract, to see how Mallory is dealing with the sabotage. “That’s fine, but first, I couldn’t help but notice that you’ve got a new car.”

Julia perches in her usual spot, but despite our usual placements, everything is different in manner. She’s blunt. Her words lack their usual sales veneer. “Not new, just mine. My company car is out on repairs right now.”

How far is too far? The situation is a blister. “Oh no, what happened?” I backpedal to avoid sounding too invested. “I hope you didn’t hit a deer out on these roads, a friend of mine recently did that and totaled his truck.” This is a lie.

Julia doesn’t look at me, flustered maybe, as she rifles my property file from her bag. “Nothing like that,” she tells the folder as she slaps it on the coffee table. “I’m not supposed to say, but when those idiots broke into the company lot last week and destroyed some stuff they also sugared the tanks to some of our vehicles. We don’t want to let it out in case the culprits get cocky and start blabbing.”

Too late for one of us. “Smart.”

“Frustrating,” she corrects. “But Mallory is more determined than ever to continue business to this community. We’re not going to let some terrorists stop us from helping the people around here. That’s not how we do business.” Her hands shake. Not from cold. This is a woman who has experienced fear. Recently. She’s looking for ways to vent. Her eyes dart quickly. “Actually, could I get some of that coffee?”

“Sure.” I leave her to make coffee. It’s so alien to see Julie Perkins, human oatmeal, acting like a real person, bashing the party lines she has to spew. I almost feel bad. I don’t like that people have to be scared, but fear convinces people, and that’s what I want. I want to convince people to leave me alone, if only for a day.

She gives me a new offer, increased from the first, and walks me through a mock-up of the drilling plans. The property I’m sitting one is situated almost exactly in the center of it all.

I make no offer to sign the new contract, but I keep it on the table.

And when she finally leaves, I decide not to call Anne.

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The Newport *Sentinel* is like most small-time newspapers. It’s a rag. Weather makes the front page. Obituaries are too detailed. The editorial section is rife with neighborly feuds. The culture section is bleached and depressing. More often than not it reports when local student make the dean’s list at school and college. It’s News.

So naturally, after the vandalism, that’s all the *Sentinel* has to talk about for the next week. Grainy photographs of the damage—a clean clipped wound in the fence, broken windows, the graffiti message, the vehicles that choked on sugar—smear the

front page. I drop fifty cents into a plastic vendor and leaf out a copy. The ink, still wet, comes off on my thumbs. Prison print style. What's black and white and red all over? Red-handed, red thumbs. I could go on. I toss the paper into the cracked driver's side window—no one will break in to my hunk of junk here, at Ross's place—and I shoulder my way into the store. A cowbell signals my entry and a collection of silver heads lift at the clatter. Old men and women I've never seen leave the place, so permanent they might have grown into the benches around the till. I wouldn't notice the difference. But they won't remember me.

The place smells of dried dog food and cheap, fatty hot dogs that have probably jumbled greasily through the same rotisserie since I was born. No one eats the hot dogs here. At Ross's you slurp down slimy thick-battered onion rings and wash it down with diet soda acidic enough to corrode pennies overnight.

To my left, pallets stacked shoulder high with off-brand kibbles. It's probably made from other dogs, some kind of social cannibalism. On wire racks, dingy white boxes of ancient candies and rock pastries glisten in pristine sealed packaging, and above, a menagerie of taxidermied squirrels and bobcats and slackjawed deer. There's even an honest-to-god mountain lion, six feet long from tail to whiskers, that these silver folks will swear was shot by some Swin or other thirty years ago. Dull glass beads fill sightless eyes sockets. I can't count them all but I can imagine the constant red-black pressure pushing and pushing on dead optic nerves, like thumbs spearing in, and I can feel a headache coming on already.

But I've got a mission. I've got a situation to scout. I select my usual—a single cow tail chew, and scuff past fogged freezer doors to the register where I place it delicately over a years-old advertisement for Skoal chewing tobacco. There's only ever one person working the whole store. Today it's a man who I only know as Junior, though sometimes it's his father, Ross, at the register. I suppose his name is Ross, too. Junior is the usual fixture here. I've never seen him anywhere else, but he's older, older than Mom, so maybe it's enough for him to exist in this place only, with the silver-haired folks and the stuffed animals.

He recognizes me, I can tell. He squints and lifts his wide-billed orange ball cap and shuffles it back and forth over a nasty case of hat hair. It's pressed down into a slick pseudo-permanent cap on his head. Junior rings up the single candy and takes a crinkled bill in return.

"You're Rose's girl?"

"Yeah." I wait as he unnecessarily bags the candy, wait for the follow up.

"Looks like you had some excitement across the way last week." He won't explain his comment any further unless I acknowledge it. It's rude to be too direct, so people speak in heavy half-allusions at gathering places such as this. I could brush him off now, offer something paltry. A nod. I could walk away and he'd leave it at that, with a clunky subtlety hanging after me, but as soon as the cowbell rang it's last I would be a hot topic for discussion. I am young. I am strange. Educated. The definition of suspicious. To leave without acknowledgment would be a vital mistake.

So I say, “Yeah, it’s crazy what they did at Mallory. Makes you wonder what people will do next.” This is good. Any way of bringing up some larger, impending depravity is sure to be a crowd favorite. Junior nods and he slides the bag my way. All around me I feel the energy revving up, a shuffling of hands, a mustering of stories and voices that will offer up all the speakable crimes. Any vandalism or robbery or illicit crops noted in recent memory.

That means the barn. So I offer it up now as a preliminary. “I had the police over when they burned down the barn a while back. They told me lots of strange things have been going on recently. A lot of break-ins. It makes me think I should start locking my doors at night.”

And that’s done it. Door locks are the ultimate symbol of change. Door locks mean no more trust. They mean something worth guarding.

Someone starts up behind me. “I’ll tell you what, it’s a lack of respect is what it is.”

And Junior’s nodding into his cap but I’m already turning, on my way out, overpriced snack in hand, satisfied that I’ve distanced myself from the situation as best as I can.

--

In the aftermath of the vandalism at Mallory, a fresh wave of attention washes over my case with the barn. Officer Latier, who spoke with me before, pays another visit, this time alone.

“The short time-frame between these events is distressing,” she says once I let her inside. She declines coffee, almost declines sitting down. “While we can’t yet make any claim of a connection between the two, it seems unlikely that two instances of vandalism would take place so close together temporally and geographically. Patterns of vandalism and arson like this have occurred before in the past. We need to investigate any potential connections.”

We walk through the same questions as before. Any enemies? Any suspicious people lingering around? But this time the routine feels less like a catechism and more like a test, a search for weak spots.

“And your insurance company, how is that process moving along?”

“I’ve filed a claim and submitted an inventory. They’re waiting for an O.K. on your end before they call for a bulldozer to clear it out.”

“Sure does look ugly, that pile of junk sitting up there like that.”

Maybe she means it to be conversationally, but it comes off as a kind of winding up to something larger. I offer a wordless hum of agreement.

“You know what I keep thinking of though? Those two gas cans in the barn. If they were full, why were they sitting so far apart? It doesn’t make sense to me.” She smiles, but the smile is more like a showing of teeth. “It’s just so convenient.”

“Me either. Sometimes I just can’t make sense of what my mother does.”

“Your mother, right. Rose Harmon. Where is she again?”

“New Mexico,” I lie. “For the winters.”

“Do you have any idea when she’ll be coming back?”

To this, I don't have a satisfying answer for either of us.

What's left of the conversation comes in fits and starts, until finally Latier stands.

"We're going to keep this scene open until we've got some solid footwork on the other case. And listen, I like you, so I'm going to give you some advice. Until we get a lead, I'd suggest you delay any transactions you make with your insurance company. And Autumn, if we do find a connection? You'll be the first to know." With that, she's gone, closing the front door behind her, and I remain on the ratty sofa where she left me, trying to make sense of two wildly different conversations we just had.

On the surface, this was just a formality that didn't lead to anything. But underneath that, there was a warning.

--

For just a moment the scale was balanced, night and day equal, and I felt a perfect symmetry. But the days pass, the scale tips, day grows heavier. It's harder to hide things in the dark.

The rain starts, doesn't stop until it's carved rivulets into the clay hillsides and everything threatens to slip down into a giant mess in Runner Creek. In the afternoons the sound of revving engines and inebriated laughter echoes up from the valley, and a few hours later a convoy of mud-splattered pickups tears down the main road. Raise Ridge is waking up from the winter.

For no reason whatsoever, I feel optimistic, struck with the conviction that everything will soon fall into place. Somehow. The sensation grows out of me like any of the other delicate green things that are even now pushing up to the sunlight. Distantly,

I'm aware that I'm as far from sorted-out as my circumstances will allow, that at any moment a cold snap could pass through and paralyze whatever this feeling is.

But the last thing I expected was fire. More fire.

Three nights after Julia Perkins visits, a deadly orange flower blossoms on the next ridge. I can see it from my kitchen window. The flames look like a face, laughing. The mouth open and moving back and forth back and forth. I can't see the smoke but I can perceive columns of darkness where stars should be. The fire creating its own void.

And I know without trying that the timbers feeding this chemical reaction are those of Mallory Energy. I picture the water boiling out of the wood, greenish grey from the chemical treatment. Paint peeling from the heated walls. Superheated windows twisting and blowing out. Innocuous office plants sizzling and suffocating on the smoke. And I feel like I'm floating high above something enormous and dangerous.

Everything has changed, but I'm still standing in the same spot, the same attitude even, as I was when I saw the flicker just a moment ago. How have I not also combusted?

More importantly, how did they know? Maybe these people, my mother's people, never intended to stop at broken windows.

I watch silently as flashing lights approach, the fire dimming, flaring back. After a while I move out to the back yard to watch the spectacle, my gaze periodically flicking to the stars to see how they fade in the light.

I stay there until the fire has burned down to nothing, until the night is quiet again.

--

Everything is for sale.

I've been planning for a couple of weeks to sell what I could from the barn, but it feels wrong when Margie shows up to pick up all the old farm junk for scrap. Scrap is just as good as money around here, she says. Just like the ground is. Just like all those layers and layers of rock punched open and sucked dry. Just as good as money. I keep a poker face as I help her load it all onto her truck. We stop periodically to guzzle water. It's only after everything is tied down in the back, red flags and all, that she offers any conversation.

"There's been some crazy shit going on around here."

"You're not kidding."

"People talk a lot, you know."

Yes, of course I know. And Margie Swin the queen of them all. I dignify the obvious with a nod.

"And some people have their theories, with your barn and then Mallory. Twice. It adds up in weird ways."

Quick. Diffuse. Distract. Defend. "Get to whatever it is that you're getting to. I've got my own things to do."

But she's revving up now. She's got something, that look says it all, like a dog with a bone, like Margie Swin with a secret. She lowers her water jug and snaps the mouthpiece back in place, never breaking eye contact with me. "I know who did it. Who burned down your barn."

“You do?” Everything in me howls to leap up with questions, with accusations. But I retain composure and break eye contact slowly, giving away nothing, because Margie doesn’t give information freely. I slowly lift my own water jug and swig

“Well, I can make a good guess.” She’s still watching and measuring and fiddling with the mouthpiece to her jug, and she snaps it up and down over and over.

I try to find a code in the rhythm of the snaps, some sort of S.O.S or a signal. I want her to give me a name, but that won’t happen.

“Well, you gonna tell the police?”

“You want me to?”

“Are you sure you know?”

“Pretty sure. I’ve been watching things. Hearing things. You want me to tell?”

“No. Don’t.”

“Alright, then. I just figured you should know.”

“Do you think they’re sorry?”

A sticky breeze rattles through the straps on the back of the truck and Margie lifts a hand to quiet them. She’s silent for a while, just staring at the straps, and then she lifts her head to survey the land around her, all the trees whipping up in the distance like something big’s coming through them. “I do,” she says. “Think they’re sorry, I mean. Although...if the police don’t have their hunches already, they’re not going to care who’s sorry or not.” And she leaves it at that.

I nod briskly, knowing that’s all I’ll ever get out of her. We part ways. She rattles up the driveway. I walk out past the house, past the place that was once a barn, down

the old track leading to the back property, thick with pines. I keep walking, lower into the valley until I reach the creek cutting through the layers of sandstone, down and down where the water disappears underground to churn up something unworldly. I watch the dark water gurgle down and feel myself slipping down with it.

The next day, I'm almost expecting it. When they come. Officer Latier is the one at the door but there are two others behind who I don't recognize.

"Do you want to come in?" I offer. As of late, my door seems to be a haven for strangers. The trio files in and we have a dance at negotiating the cramped space.

Latier's frank about it once we've all settled in. "It's serious, this time, Autumn."

As if it wasn't serious before. Nevertheless, the bottom drops out of my stomach. I've been implicated. I can't say I wasn't worried about it. "Am I being arrested for something?" I'm prepared for silence. I want to be silent. Silence is the most comfortable option for me.

But relief.

"No," she says. "We just want to have you on record about everything going on in your community. You have a unique perspective on the situation. It should be very painless."

Now I'm wondering why the suits had to come. Were they expecting resistance? From little ole me? But then they flash their badges. Feds. No way. Perhaps they suspect I'm a protégé.

They expect too much of me.

The man and woman perform a practiced casualness, which, even though I recognize its artificiality, still puts me at ease. They introduce themselves and I immediately forget their names, too busy watching her fiddle with a recording device and put it on the table and him spread out a thick portfolio that must be all about my mother. Oh how I'd love to get my hands on that, just to see another small glimpse of what she's really like.

But I don't know anything about my mother's questionable hobbies. I coach myself.

They grill me on the barn for a while before seguing into the disaster over at Mallory Energy.

"We're concerned that this recent rash of activity is linked to the same group that committed similar crimes about two decades ago. Are you familiar with any of that story?"

No, of course not, I wasn't even sentient at that point.

"Do you know where your mother is right now?"

New Mexico. For the winter.

"But it's spring now."

She likes to take her time.

"Are you aware of your mother's affiliations?"

Affiliations with what exactly?

"Your mother was a member, and the suspected leader, of a terror organization in the region."

Incredulity. Shock. Shocked people repeat themselves. No, that's...that's impossible. She's just a fifty-something retiree who loves to garden and snowbird her winters away in New Mexico.

"Unfortunately, it seems your mother was lying to you. We managed to track her to her usual home this winter but she had already been long gone by that time. Do you have any other idea of where she might be?"

When I'm unable to provide an adequate answer to this, the carefully crafted façade begins to slip. The man, whatever his name is, impatiently overturns some pages in his portfolio and readjusts his stance.

"Your mother is a known threat to the safety of this nation. Do you understand that? Do you want a list of things she's wanted for? Conspiracy to Commit Arson of United States Government Property and of Property Used in Interstate Commerce; Conspiracy to Commit Arson and Destruction of an Energy Facility; Attempted Arson of a Building; Arson of a Vehicle; Arson of a Building; Destruction of an Energy Facility."

"She's personally responsible for more than thirty-million dollars in damages," the woman adds.

Latier maintains silence throughout the list of my mother's crimes, but her expression hardens as they continue. This is the face of a woman who has heard this list before, maybe even added some of the items to it.

With the heat of three intent gazes focused on me, I entertain thoughts of treachery. Betraying Mom is just the same as betraying myself. The others, however—Anne and those Polaroid faces—are disposable to me in comparison. Maybe I could

name names, turn them off her scent, and I could walk away from this with a semi-clear conscience no matter which way I spin it.

For one bleak moment, I half-open my mouth, before my resolve crumbles. I don't have the grit to sacrifice anyone that way. Then the moment passes, and they take a new direction of questioning.

"We suspect that your mother may still be helping coordinate the current attacks. We know this is hard for you, but if you could give us any information regarding her whereabouts, you would be helping a lot of people out."

"And Autumn, there's a reward of up to fifty-thousand dollars for information leading to her arrest. That money can go to anyone. Even you."

"Think of what you could do with that kind of money. Maybe you could even go back to school?"

I will give them credit where it is due. They've done their research. Few things would tempt me as much. With the hypothetical maximum amount they offer me now, in the pressure cooker of this living room, I would have enough to revive my education, get a degree get a job somewhere do all those thing mom drilled into me to do.

But then no one would be there for me to share in the accomplishment. Maybe this is a hallmark card sentiment, but it's a sentiment that I feel nonetheless. When they looked through whatever files they have, they probably saw a daughter estranged from her mother. They saw her violence. My hesitation. But they failed to understand the similarities between us. The children's book wedged between the gun and the

blackmail. My own dark determination, the one that propelled me to set fire to my own property in the hopes that this small sabotage would benefit me in the long run.

I maintain my silence. I am good at this, and in the end, they exhaust their questions on me. By the time they leave I feel anesthetized

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Julia arrives again. I feel like I can call her Julia now. I've destroyed her company car. We're old friends. She's got raindrops in her hair.

I invite her inside.

I briefly turn my head back to her as we shuffle into the small living room. I don't see any suitcase, and that worries me. I don't want a repeat of her last visit. I've more than proved that I don't handle threats well.

"Is this a personal visit?"

She gives me a heavy look. No bullshit this time. "No, still business." She produces contract from her coat pocket.

I give it a long look before leaving to make coffee. She sits alone on the ratty sofa while I watch snowflakes accumulate webs in the corners of the kitchen window. The coffee gargles out in starts and fits, and we settle down in our usual spots. The mundane gesture is oddly comforting.

"Warm in here," she offers. Anything to ease the tension.

I shrug, and that's the end of it.

She doesn't respond to this, only slurps her coffee in a way I learned was rude in college. I itch to say something inflammatory. But I've been around enough fires of late.

“I’m surprised you’re here again,” I say. “So soon after. There’s a rumor going around that I’m a terrorist.”

“Mallory Energy is resilient,” is all she says.

We sit together as I consider this. Then I consider her, and the bravery it requires to keep trying for something you’ve repeatedly been refused. “Go on,” I finally say.

“Give me your spiel.”

“Autumn, your property is right in the middle of our projected pipeline. I’ve made all the arguments I have, but can’t you consider how much energy it will take to build all the way around your acreage? It just doesn’t make sense. Thinking about the people around you who need this pipeline, who need the money. This is a jobs increase, this is a livelihood we’re talking about, for all the people around you. We can do this without your property, but we don’t want to. And you’ll be missing out on all the payoff. We’ve offered you a higher rate than most of your neighbors. Honestly Autumn it’s just greedy to hold out on them like this. Please. Consider.”

“I’ve given you my answer so many times. I don’t understand what you want from me.”

“Your signature.” She slides contract across the table to me. I’ve seen this contract so many times, destroyed it even.

I think about my mother. She will never be able to come back to this place. At least not for a long time. What is it that she will come back to?

All my life I’ve been encouraged to leave this place, from every side. From every angle. There are so many reasons I should say yes, and there’s a terrible part of me that

thinks Mom would want me to say yes, too. That she's wrapped up this property and her childhood and her memories and given them to me so that I might benefit. That's she taken herself from me to draw the danger elsewhere, to make it easier to say yes. It's like giving me a dream.

I am not like my mother, I've realized this more than ever since that night with the sugar. I cannot fight so courageously for what I want. I am no good at sacrifice. I am no Machiavelli. No Demeter.

But I can fight in my own humble, small ways. Like the albino ragweed in the barn that, despite everything, without sunlight, lived.

"I've decided," I say, and I unsheathe the pen with a decisive click.

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I spend the majority of my day packing, collecting all the junk I didn't manage to sell and hauling it back to my car. Last to go are the two boxes filled with USH gear, and when I take them from their spot in the corner, the spot they never left, they leave imprints behind in the carpet. It looks a pause button. Time will fade the marks.

As I say goodbye to the house, I make amends with whatever memories still remain here. I don't know for certain when some will live in it next, but I don't have the heart to sell it off, not just yet.

I remember in my childhood vaguely registering her pattern. Mom maintained a revolving door of boys, all of whom existed first as eager voices at the front door, guarantees of something. Confidence. Later they were furtive whispers in a morning shuffle of out out out. Sometimes they'd make it as far as dinner. Those who warranted

my audience were all the same. Fresh faced, young. They had claims. They winked at me over catered dishes and promised a future in which they would exist. After that they always ceased to exist entirely. I used to ask about the nice men but Mom had other things to think about. It didn't take me long to realize that for her, she hadn't just forgotten. These boys had never existed. Once and only once, I woke up to a bare chested man in the kitchen. Making banana pancakes and whistling. I'd never seen a man this close before without a dining table between us. This man was mythical. I wondered and what he could have done to my mother as I watched her dark eyes follow him from the rim of her coffee cup. He shuffled the skillet. Flipped a pancake midair and turned to her with a smile, which she returned in a businesslike way. I marveled at his chest hair as the two of them sliced into the spongy stickiness of the pancakes. I didn't care for mine. Too sweet. I wanted the salty potato cakes we always had. I worried too about this mythical man and Mom. He came back to dinner for a second time and he cooked it. Breakfast for dinner. Apparently only pancakes in the repertoire. But after that he vanished just like the rest. She wasn't being coy or getting bored. She was jealous of my attention to these men. She wanted it for herself. And maybe some small part of her also thought she was trying to protect me. Maybe they were being tested. And they all failed. I wonder what my reaction would had to have been for them to pass. Or maybe, which I suspect the most of all my theories, it was a doomed test to begin. No correct answer, no winner, no consolation prize.

This happened a lot with her. Not just with the men. Her approach to life in general was, and is, all-or-nothing. Something is good until it isn't. Something is wrong until it's right.

Funny. All those times she was leaving me, and she thought she was doing her best to keep me close.

Now I'm doing the same thing, in a way. I'm using the mineral money for one more semester, and then who knows what after that. Maybe I'll try to find her. More than likely she'll find me first.

I lock the door on this odd trinket of insight. I'll let it stay there. My key slides into the ignition and the car starts with ease, none of the protesting I've come to expect. Then I'm up the driveway, away from the cookie cutter house, and it disappears from my rear view vision as I navigate the hairpin turn.

The route is so familiar to me that I barely register it in my peripheral. I could be on my way to anywhere.

This isn't the end of it for Mom. She's still being hunted.

She isn't just a snowbird anymore. She's something else. She needs heat. A firebird who will follow the equator as the world freezes over. Down down down.

I would like to see her like that.

I keep driving. Past the cemetery road, past the pond in its velvety green coat of algae, past Cantworth Ridge and the garishly decorated lawn with the plaster deer and the butterfly haze.

I would like to witness her as something other than a mother to me. I'd like to see her identity beyond that. I'd like to see her selfishness, and her power beyond maternal anger. She would be something fearsome to behold. But I know I can't follow her, can't go to her and witness this other half. At the first sight of me, she would turn into my mother again.

I keep driving. Past the tree where a boy died a couple of years ago, down the hill, the road following the topography in twists and swirls. The highway is coming up.

I keep driving. As I pass each landmark I say goodbye to the version of it that existed in my head. The version I foolishly perpetuated as some way of coping. Now I can see this place as it exists in reality, however painful that might be. With each passing mile, it becomes easier. There is still a version of me standing on the front steps of my childhood home. She's still stubbornly refusing to let go. But I feel nearer to her somehow.

The divide is there, but I feel the distance closing.

Critical Analysis

This project began as an exercise in novel structure. I had studied chiasmus, what I call ring composition, in English 232: The Novel, with David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*. Intrigued by the simultaneous complexity and ease of this structure, I started studying ring composition in my own time. I read another of Mitchell's novels, *Cloud Atlas*, and attended a lecture on ring composition by pop-lit "Hogwarts Professor" John Granger. It was during this lecture that I discovered Mary Douglas' *Thinking In Circles*, which provided the theoretical foundations for the concept of ring composition.

Chiasmus, as it is properly called, dates back to the oral tradition of storytelling, when the mirrored plot of a narrative aided in memorization and delivery (Douglas 12). Great works of literature, from The Iliad to the Bible, all share common characteristics of chiasmus (Douglas 6). At its most basic level, chiastic structure necessitates that the end of a narrative corresponds to its beginning, these correspondences often indicated by key words or phrases, sometimes even images. The hinge of the narrative rests at its middle, where it flips back and begins mirroring itself (ex: A, B, C, D, C, B, A, where the center and core meaning of the narrative reside at D). In longer, more complex narratives, the middle of the may even be a chiasmus in itself. Often, "the center of a polished ring integrates the whole," meaning that the center will also share key correspondences with the beginning and end, ensuring its assimilation into the rest of the narrative (Douglas 32).

Outlined above are the core characteristics of chiastic structure, but other, more subtle and in-depth rules exist beyond them. Douglas identifies seven more, these

being: exposition of prologue, split into two halves, parallel sections, indicators to mark individual sections, central loading, rings within rings, and closure at two levels (Douglas 36-37). I endeavored to integrate a number of these attributes into my own work. I split the narrative into four sections, and then used certain characters to indicate parallels between corresponding sections. Often, one section focuses on a particular character (Anne, for example). These parallels allowed for some creative license, creating “opportunities of taking the text to deeper levels of analogy” through unexpected, sometimes subtle parallels (Douglas 36). I also chose to create a small chiasmus at the center of the narrative in order to emphasize the turning point, as “much of 6h4 structure depends on a well-marked turning point that should be unmistakable” (Douglas 37). Just as crucial as the central point is the closure of the narrative, which, to complete a real ring as examined by Douglas, must do more than simply invert the order of the beginning. The final section of the work should produce closure thematically as well as structurally, and the problem posed at the beginning of the work should resolve, successfully or not, by the final page.

With the skeletal foundations of the project established, it was time to populate this structure with content—a reversal of process for some, certainly, but I found this didn’t rob me of any creative agency. In fact, the strictures inspired me to an extent. I needed something engaging and creatively challenging, something which the chiasmic structure wouldn’t render contrite. A longstanding interest in environmental literature combined with my own biographical Appalachian background provided an ideal set of subjects. The cyclicity of nature coupled well with the cyclicity of the chiasmic narrative, and the

current natural gas boom in the area added another layer of complexity to the developing narrative. This established, I began my research into place-based literature.

Leonard Lutwack's *The Role of Place in Literature* provided a strong basis for the rest of my research in this area. Place, as defined by Lutwack is a character's response to a landscape in both its concreteness and its symbolic relation to their life and the important actions transpiring in this place (Lutwack 26). All places, whether drawn from geographic reality or fantasy, from literature or actual life, serve figurative ends and thereby sacrifice part of their concreteness as they cater to some human desire or craving beyond the present reality. Lutwack notes, "people who have the greatest need for place are those who have failed, for one reason or another, to keep pace with history or with the movement of society around them" (Lutwack 237). I knew that my narrator required a situation to facilitate her need for place, and based this disjointedness around a return, after many years, to her childhood home. "Much of the fear of placelessness," Lutwack adds, "stems from resistance to the accelerated rate of change that does not allow sufficient time for some people to adapt themselves to the alteration of places" (Lutwack 237). Of course, after an interval of years, the landscape in her head would have transformed through countless iterations. She creates an idealized reality, and experiences disorientation when this isn't the reality she encounters upon her return.

Yet it wasn't enough to study place generically, as I had a specific geographic area in mind. Appalachia, specifically West Virginia, poses its own challenges as a literary landscape. Like any other region, it comes prepackaged with its own mythology and

stigmas, and the reader approaches it with a set of presuppositions and biases. Having lived in the area all my life, I brought my own experiences to the narrative, but ignoring the canon of Appalachian literature and culture would be thoughtless at best and disingenuous at worst. I devised a reading list from which I could sample and build a more academic understanding of the culture. Horace Kephardt 's *Our Southern Highlanders*, a classic text in Appalachian studies, provides the first thorough cultural analysis of the region. Kephardt isn't the final word on Appalachian culture, of course, but the fact remains that, even more than a century later, his work influences the way the outside world imagines, and stigmatizes, the figure of the southern highlander. From extreme isolation (with reports of some people never travelling more than four miles from their mountain homes), to mythologies of idiosyncratic "Elizabethan or Chaucerian or even pre-Chaucerian" dialect, Kephardt paints a picture of a people at once fiercely independent and desperately out of touch with modern times (Kephardt 22, 287). This source provided crucial theoretical background, as I developed a critical shorthand specialized to Appalachia. I could recognize common tropes and themes in much of the literature, and I could adapt it for my own purposes, experimenting and inverting where I desired. I knew, for example, that I wanted to avoid integrating dialect into dialogue, in part because so many writers have attempted this and only managed inaccurate, often condescending reproductions. However, I did want to recreate the phenomena of isolation and minimal mobility in the fictional community of Raise Ridge. I cultivated claustrophobia both spatially and socially by creating a microcosm: within it, tiny

community churches, stores, roads labeled after family surnames, and perhaps the most stifling, a cemetery filled with those same surname dating back for generations.

After gathering a sense of the “typical” Appalachian community from Kephardt, my research led me to *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature* by Elizabeth Engelhardt. Engelhardt provides a thorough account of the origins of feminism and environmentalism in a region not typically well-known for its progressive movements. In her work she uncovers what she calls “the forgotten legacy of ecological feminism in Appalachia” (Engelhardt 32). With the landscape literally blocking them in on all sides, early Appalachian women writers could not help but acknowledge the deep connections between themselves and the environment. However, deeply embedded structures of power influence(d) Appalachian community members, at times preventing these women from penning explicitly ecofeminist works as they are now defined.

I wanted to convey this complex relationship between Appalachia as a people and as a place, and with this in mind, I included in the narrative the element of *ecotage*. This word, a portmanteau of “ecological sabotage,” describes an environmental activist movement that emphasizes protest through the dismantling and interruption of technological progress (Schneller 500). Though I personally refer to this movement as ecotage, many of the characters in my thesis use a much more problematic term: ecoterrorism. Especially in a post-9/11 society, the word “terrorism” carries heavy political implications, and, all too often, is not used carefully. To label environmentalist movements, focused on activism and civil disobedience, as terrorism is certainly

politically irresponsible, yet the trend continues, even as I write my thesis. In February 2015, the Federal Bureau of Investigation began paying visits to opponents of the Keystone XL pipeline (Arnsdorf). I upheld this problematic label in my thesis in order to create an accurate portrayal of this issue as it exists in West Virginia today. A concern occupying the state's collective consciousness is whether or not we can extricate our personal well-being from the well-being of the land surrounding us. Rural West Virginia, simultaneously stricken by poverty and environmental exploitation/disaster—the 2014 Elk River chemical spill comes to mind—embodies this tension. In a region so economically dependent upon the extraction industry, an intervention in that industry, regulatory or otherwise, poses a significant threat. Ecotage, with its liberally radical, often illegal methodology, might be seen as terror to some (Harlan).

However, I want to further emphasize the important distinction between terror and sabotage. I modeled the ecotage in my thesis as a radicalized off-branching of the Earth First! movement, even going as far as to borrow the popularized slogan: “No compromise in the defense of mother Earth” (Schneller 500). Other details from the text serve to make subtle allusions to the movement. For example, Rose, the narrator's mother, runs off to New Mexico in the early 80's, at which point the Earth First! movement was just picking up steam in Albuquerque (Schneller 500). Earth First! owes its inception to a number of literary works, the most influential among them Edward Abbey's novel, *The Monkeywrench Gang*, which “fueled a movement of nonviolent direct-action environmentalism” targeted at objects rather than people (Schneller 2). Sabotage inflicts damage on machinery, property, and the like, while terrorism inflicts

damage on people. Worth noting is the fact that, as I mentioned above, the particular brand of ecotage portrayed in my thesis departs from the mainstream Earth First! movement in its degree of radicalism. While Earth First! does not typically encourage second-degree arson, this still falls under the category of sabotage rather than terrorism.

I had the how. I had the where, what, and when. I just needed the who. Continuing with the theme of rings and cycles, I took interest in a generation-based story, focusing on a mother-daughter relationship, perhaps for the sole reason that anyone who has had an extensive relationship with her mother could write a sizable novel about it. In order to flesh out the complexities of the narrative I wanted to create, I looked into survey analyses of mother-daughter relationships in contemporary literature. Works by Hilary Crew and Jane Flax were essential in developing a proper understanding the narrative tropes of the mother-daughter plot. In this stage, I cherry-picked to shape the relationship around the story I wanted to tell. Of particular interest were the concepts of maternal absence, association of the mother with literal objects in the text, and finally the move from associating the mother to literal to the figurative. In this psychological progression I could realize my preoccupations with place; the mother's absence transforms into a presence through association with place, and finally absence again as the literal place becomes the mere memory of a place, a figurative space in the narrator's mind (Crew 230-233).

The physical and narrative distance between mother and daughter also often serves as the impetus for plot, as the mother's absence allows the daughter to become the

protagonist (Crew 129). Jane Flax noted this phenomenon in her psychoanalytical survey of mother-daughter relationships. A maternal presence poses “a potentially paralyzing conflict” between the autonomous self and nurturance, and “on an unconscious level” the drive for independence “may be experienced as treachery toward the mother” (Flax 180). An absentee mother resolves this paralysis, freeing the child to practice autonomy without experiencing abandoner’s guilt. The child’s own sense of abandonment, however, is another story altogether, and one that my protagonist faces from the beginning of the text when she returns to an empty home. It is, of course, important to acknowledge the datedness of psychoanalytic theory. Marianne Hirsch criticizes the paradigm of the abandoning/abandoned mother in literature as “eclipsing the mother’s own voice,” and as a result eclipsing “the political dimensions of women’s lives, conflating them with the psychological (Hirsch 152). For my own part, I attempted to invert this paradigm, basing the narrative around the pursuit of the maternal figure rather than the separation from her. Similarly, I made efforts to sever the narrator’s political and psychological identities. The narrator’s final act is to express a continued desire for her mother’s presence, while simultaneously distancing herself from her mother’s political philosophies.

With the set-up complete, I moved on to the next stage—the actual writing of the thesis. At this point my main challenge was to decide how I would engage with the Appalachias written before me. For this portion I looked to all kinds of writing, from poetry to fiction to memoir. I noticed quite quickly that my version of West Virginia did not match the West Virginia I found in literature. This was mainly an issue of time. Few

writers focused on the region as it exists now, and I wanted my work to give it a facelift. I wanted to know what became of the grandchildren and great grandchildren of Kephardt's southern highlanders. In a time when the Internet and cell phones and highways exist, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain the same extreme insularity.

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls aided me in this respect, because this memoir had the most modern setting of any of my readings. Set in the latter half of the 20th century, the memoir depicts Walls' nomadic family life before they finally settle in Welch, WV, where they live in poverty. Her struggle to extricate herself from this economically depressed community embodies a larger trend. The population in West Virginia has steadily declined since the mid-1960's, with the youth demographic making up most of the migration to larger, urban centers. The state of degradation portrayed in Walls' memoir has escalated in the intervening decades, exacerbated by nationwide economic recession and a (slowly) declining dependence on coal as an energy source. I portrayed this state of decay mainly through the narrator's nostalgia as she compares the community she left to the one she finds upon her return. Even in the space of three years, landmarks have vanished, and people have died or moved on. "Very little has changed," she notes. "Only the big things have."

The Glass Castle also inspired some of the psychological undertones of the work. Although the narrator's experiences are in no way comparable to the real experiences Walls faced, the pair does share a sense of dual identity. Walls negotiates the self that writes the memoir and the self that experienced the events within the memoir.

Similarly, the narrator must struggle with her dual selves, a conflict evident from the very first line: “There’s two of me.” There is the self that is returning home and the self that was home all along. The narrator of my thesis, in many senses, personifies the tension between dual selves. Autumn, like the season after which she is named, is all about hesitation and duality. Choosing to sell her mineral rights means opening up her beloved home to the alienation and perversion of industrialization. Refusing to sell them means willingly allowing her neighbors, and herself, to live in poverty, and the exploitation will only go on somewhere else. There is no right answer.

While grappling with this complexity, I turned to Terry Tempest Williams, a leader in the field of environmental literature. Two works in particular, *Refuge* and *When Women Were Birds*, appealed to me with their kaleidoscopic meditations on family, environment, and social justice. I wanted, at least in part, to emulate her technique of integrating science into literature. In the process of finding my own small place among literary giants, I delved into *Listen Here: Women Writing on Appalachia*, a diverse collection of women’s voices across genres and time periods. Works ranging from the likes of Annie Dillard to West Virginia’s own Denise Giardina initiated me to the main conversations taking place in Appalachian women’s literature. I was also inspired by Dianne Gilliam Fisher’s collection of poetry, *Kettle Bottom*. This collection, a fascinating blend of anthropology, testimonio, and autobiography, recounts the West Virginia Coal Wars of 1920-21. Fisher’s emotional honesty and frank description of this upheaval captured my attention, and I tried to maintain that same level of honesty in my own work.

Ultimately, research for this project consisted of two parts: the theoretical and the practical. Because I devised to compose a long work of fiction, I needed to understand the mechanics of writing extended fiction as well as conceptualize the finished product. Therefore, my initial research focused on theory and slowly evolved from this into a broader reading of literature that would (hopefully) share characteristics with my own work. In the process, I managed to integrate these elements into a cohesive composition.

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