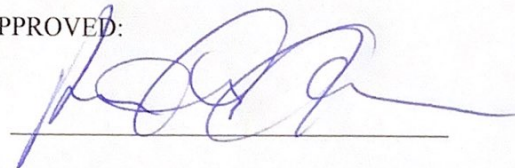


TO MEASURE A MOMENT  
AN HONORS THESIS  
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Talia Cieslinski. To Measure a Moment.

(Professor Bernice McFadden, English Department)

## Abstract

This thesis interrogates the linear model of time and its ramifications in relationships, experiences and society. In order to adequately challenge the linear model of time, I use creative writing to imagine a world where time functions in a more fluid way, and the ways in which time moves fluidly in ways we are not used to seeing. In four short stories, all exploring the subjectivity of time, I hope to foster an acknowledgment of the way the objective model of time is inaccurate to lived experiences. The thesis begins with a forward including theoretical explanations for this idea of time as well as literary inspiration for these stories. The first story “My Friend, The Feeling.” explores how connection to a person can be realized through a shared experience of time. The second, “Acela” explores the relationship between time and psychical space and the ways in which drug use alters the experience of time. The third story, “Mud House Loop” addresses the cyclical nature of time and how memory, relationships and time are interconnected elements of personal experiences. The fourth story “Kids, Anymore” uses a format that splits between chronological storytelling and the same story alphabetized by sentence. The story is about adolescence and having friendships end because of growing up at different speeds. I hope that these stories serve to expand the common understanding of time and reinforce the importance of challenging the singular linear model of time.

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## FORWARD

Entering my final year of college, I thought about what it meant for a year to culminate, for the undergraduate chapter of my life to end, and how to deal with feeling like time is running out. I imagined extending my fingernails into claws to hold on to moments where my youth became so salient that I could touch it. I quickly discovered that one cannot hold onto moments, one cannot slow time, and no matter how permanent a moment feels, it never is. After months of bellyaching anxiety around the idea of time moving faster than I was, I decided that the only way to come to peace with time's constant pressure was to destroy the idea that time is finite. I began to see my life as a series of interlocking webs, weaving in and out of one another, all connected, and myself as the spider, bouncing between moments that feel close. Consulting my favorite authors, philosophers and lyricists, I realized time is subjective, and the construction of time as linear is a man made one. We as individuals have the power to change our own personal constructions of time to fit the needs of our relationships and experiences.

As an English major, I spend a lot of time developing questions and less time answering them. Most of my education has focused on analyzing and interrogating concepts and structures. I can confidently say I know almost nothing provable, nothing that can be measured with numbers or arguments or a one sentence thesis statement. Studying English at Tulane, I have learned how to criticize, interrogate, and work through complex truths using creative writing. This thesis is a very long-winded criticism, using creative writing, of the way our society demands we all believe time is moving in a constant singular linear direction.

I am interested in how the fallacy of a single linear model of time produces interpersonal relationships that are dependent on individuals' differences in their experiences in time. Relationships of all kinds suffer as a result of the assumption that everyone is having a unified

linear experience of time. I used creative writing as a tool to highlight how the diversity in experience of the passage of time is present in everyday life, in the development and destruction of relationships and is an often invisible force that dictates so much of our life.

I wrote a series of four stories about the non-linearity of time. The first deals with the idea of time travel, and feeling connected to a person based on a shared experience of time. The second explores the ways that drug use alters the perception of time and how this alteration of time allows for a more free experience but comes at the cost of being disconnected from other people due to experiencing time in a way that diverges from the norm.

The third story deals with memory and permanence and the way time is marked on the body through tattooing, the ultimate symbol of permanence. The fourth story takes inspiration from a New York Times fiction submission by Sheila Heti who alphabetized her diary over the course of many decades. I thought this was a brilliant way to play with the idea of chronology, and complicate the way time works in fiction. The story I wrote is about a 13 year old who deals with growing up at a different pace than her friend, and the format alternates between chronological telling of the story and the same story alphabetized by sentence.

I took inspiration from a variety of works I've encountered throughout my time in studying English at Tulane. I read Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* this year. This collection of short stories uses language in the most creative way I have ever encountered. In the story, *Especially Heinous*, Machado uses the titles of Law and Order, Special Victim Unit to tell a surreal story of violence against women and the spiritual and physical results of this violence. Machado's use of eerie language creates the sense of being inside a dream. This writing style was extremely influential to me and helped me grow as a writer from the first story I wrote "My Friend, The Feeling" that incorporates surreal and eerie, but in a

slightly muddled way, to the third story I wrote, “The Mud House Loop,” which incorporates those surreal elements in a way that is more streamlined and understandable on the first read.

Seneca’s *On the Shortness of Life* was a huge inspiration for my story “Acela”, and helped me to gain insight and perspective on one of the most salient measures of time there is: the lifespan. *On the Shortness of Life* includes the quote “It is not that we have a short time to live, it is that we waste a lot of it.” This quote highlighted how time is constructed as a finite resource. In Seneca’s conception of time, the onus is on us as individuals to make the most out of the little time we are allotted on this earth. Seneca warns against the ways we “waste” our time, one of the ways being use of drugs as an indulgence. This idea was an inspiration for my story “Acela” because I wondered if we thought of drug use as tools to engage more freely with time rather than as a waste, would the stress around wasting the resource of time would change? I hope that through this story people who use drugs are portrayed as people who are experiencing time differently, rather than people who are indulgent or villainized for wasting something infinite.

The novel “Einstein's Dream” by Alan Lightman is structured differently than any other novel I have ever read. The main character of the book is a fictional Albert Einstein as he discovers the theory of relativity through his dreams. This book was extremely influential in understanding the merging of fiction and metaphysics. Lightman uses a vignette style that is extremely metaphysically rich and helped me to understand some of the scientific support for the non-linear model of time. The invocation of dreams and in combination with the development of the theory of relativity beautifully explores the ways that the subjectivity of time is both scientifically fact, and also impossible to logically fully consider and demands the use of a creative medium in order to fully explore.

The theory of special relativity itself provided me with questions to explore through writing. The idea of space and time's inherent interconnectedness inspired questions on why we have separated them in our colloquial use of the two concepts. I wondered what time is really a measure of if we have alienated its connection to space? In the story "Acela" I explore this connection between time and space and imagine that the distortion of time caused by the use of drugs can also distort one's experience of physical space. Acceleration is also a tool for exploring this metaphysical connection between time, space and linearity. I have not taken a physics class but I relied on very basic understandings of these theories as inspiration for interrogating these concepts and how they expand the possibility of the construction of time as more fluid. The disconnect between the scientific definitions and explanations of time, as a dynamic concept, to our common experience of time being singular, and linear in one direction highlight the need to explore these concepts and their ramifications in our life through a creative medium.

Bernice McFadden's short story "*OBF, Inc.*" published in "*Cutting Edge, The New Stories of Mystery and Crime from Women Writers.*" was very deepened my understanding of how to build suspense in a short story, and how to build a world that mirrors our own, but with an added sense of surrealness. Stories like "*OBF, Inc.*" perfectly curate an understandable and believable world with characters that can be related to, while warping expectations to push the reader towards an understanding of broader concepts. I try to channel Professor McFadden's simplicity, specificity and creativity in my surreal world building and character development.

The story "*Little Beast*" by C Pam Zhang, published in the "*The Best American Short Stories of 2021*" discusses growing up in a beautiful, terrifying and surreal way. This was a huge inspiration for my story "Kids, Anymore." It inspired the train of thought that in the process of



discovering yourself as you age, there are moments where you become unrecognizable, and the inherent horror in inhabiting a body and a mind you cannot recognize. This story also inspired me to think of age as not having an absolute speed, but as being dependent on relationships and experiences.

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* was the first book I studied in college where the idea of time as cyclical was discussed. Ward describes a character that cannot tell a story in order and events of the past are revealed as the story moves through the present in a seamless, beautiful and harrowing account of past traumas. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* was the first time I read a novel in which time served a crucial role in the events of the plot. The complication of time in the novel showcased the cyclical nature of the carceral system and the ways systems of oppression operate to constantly reproduce existing power structures. Ward's use of storytelling in order to invoke a variation on the typical model of time allowed me to view the complication of time as a method of resistance to the existing power structures that the linear model of time relies on. Time is one of the many aspects of life that we are supposed to view as natural and allow it to constantly reproduce unquestioned. There are incredible amounts of importance in recognizing and challenging the structures that are viewed as the most natural, in order to curate an improved world.

The story "Mud House Loop" takes inspiration from queer theory, and specifically, how time functions differently for queer people. The theory states that queer people's lives do not progress the way non-queer people's lives do. Experiences like coming out, and having a first same gender romantic experience alter the "progress" of the lifespan. "Mud House Loop." discusses a breakup that causes a rupture in time, and challenges ideas of temporality and permanence. Queer theory allowed me to think of queerness as being inherently connected to a

non-linear timeline and through this story I interrogate what it would mean for queer heartbreak to further complicate the progress of time.

Many of the short stories are inspired by elements of my own experience where I have felt the most disconnected to a linear model of time, or the most connected to an alternative model of time. Initially, I worried that writing inspired by my own experiences muddled the works' fictional aspects. However, I hope that the presence of experiences that I have had in the work are both undetectable to the reader and help to add authenticity to the piece.

The stories in the piece are ordered based on when they were written. The first story I wrote, now eight months ago, feels like it was written by someone else. I expect the writing style changes to be noticeable and I hope it helps to reinforce ideas about time that support the message of time as fluid. I have learned a lot about what it means to effectively question concepts and structures that have left me with more questions than answers. My uncertainty is clear in my writing and I hope it helps to inspire questions about all structures that are constructed as natural.

In an early conversation with Professor McFadden on how to incorporate these concepts into a series of short stories without writing directly about time, she gave me advice that has stuck with me throughout the process of writing these stories; "It's the clocks on the wall." This advice helped me to gain perspective on the presence of time in every aspect of life, and all the ways we've invented a measurement of time. Time, scientifically, is a measurement of space but the spatial elements of time get muddled when we think of time as numbers relating to moments. I hope for this piece to illuminate the ramifications of measuring moments objectively and the possibility of freedom that comes with a more flexible understanding of time.

## My Friend, The Feeling

August 21st, 2021, 3:45am

Mary left my house for the last time at four am. It was August. The rain had stopped falling 20 minutes earlier. The hot streets spat back up steam so dense that when I looked out the paneled second story window, I couldn't tell what I was seeing.

I was the only one of my roommates who waited out Mary's final hours sitting on the couch listening to *Clairo* sing "Pretty Girl" as Mary cut out figures from a collection of mangled magazines. Her blond hair hung around her round face, eyes narrowed and brow furrowed – completely focused on the collage she was making. She wore a dark collared long sleeve t-shirt, despite her summer long commitment to tan.

Mary had moved into our spare bedroom in June and stayed to the end of August subletting from my roommate Taylor between our Junior and Senior years of college. Mary's parents lived 15 miles away from us in a suburb of New Orleans. She spent most of her days driving her mother's Toyota Highlander back and forth between our house and her parents. When I wasn't waitressing, I would come with her for the drive down the interstate and we would talk about music and play with the air flowing through the open windows.

My college roommates had become Mary's roommates too this summer, but on her last night in our house, they had all made other plans. Sara had work early so she went to bed, Julia was at the last pool party of the summer that infamously ran until sunrise, Taylor had yet to return from her parent's place in upstate New York. The roommates had all taken vacations and visits with their families and weekends away at fancy hotels throughout the summer, so Mary and I spent a lot of the time in the five person house alone, Mary made fun of me for never leaving and I made fun of her for having nowhere else to go. Now, in her final hours, we didn't talk about the fact that we hadn't gone a day without seeing each other in many months. On the

couch, reaching between her knees to grab her Juul, the space her body took up felt like an extension of mine and I didn't let myself think about the immediacy with which we would be separated.

I could barely detect the quiver in her voice when the clock struck 3:48 and she asked:

“Can we switch to *Oso Oso*?”

“Sure, but I can't remember who they remind me of.” It's not *All Time Low*, or *We the Kings*, could be *Fall out Boy* but they're too mainstream, I thought.

“I think it is every emo band from the early 2000s.” She said, spreading out the words to emphasize the chronic interchangeability of the genre.

“Yeah you're right,” I offered a sheepish admittance, before picking the phone up from between my legs and unlocking. 3:49

*Basking in the Glow* played quietly through my phone speakers and I was visited briefly by this sinking feeling that everything would be different if I could produce a name of a band that sounds exactly the same, its existence being one of fiction. Band names from a lost time rattled through my head. They do all sound the same.

I started to wonder what our last words to each other will be. What they will mean. We sat sharing a couch cushion, my knees facing hers, as she cut out, placed and carefully painted glue over, a disembodied head of Howie Mandel on top of a tractor trailer barreling down the Yangtze river.

Breaking my gaze from her collage as it became more and more absurd, my eyes bounced between the window stained green from algae, psychedelic paintings, the crooked blinds, dirty beanbags and loose fan blades sitting defeated next to their wire cage.

My eyes finally settle on a tarot card tapestry hanging lazily on the wall. The reds blended in with the oranges; “THE SUN” the fabric screamed at me. I laughed looking at it, wondering whose future it could be perpetually reading from its aerial view.

“You could stay.” I blurted before I knew what would come out. It was a recycled line, to the point where it functioned as a joke. Unlike those of us who had chosen to participate in this ever-present heat that engulfed us, Mary was never one to indulge. She was going to Ohio.

“I’ll stay forever, until I have to go.” She responded through a tired smile.

A week earlier I had talked her down from a prolonged period of panic about her upcoming departure out of this city. I told her there were no endings, just perpetual forevers that follow you around until they stop.

“And you won’t even notice it.” I had said. “It’s an eventuality not worth worrying about.”

Her voice sounded controlled when she repeated it. This was her auditory quality, like someone was always at a soundboard auto-tuning to produce an artificial calm listening experience. Ambient Spa Noise.

Her hands flipped through magazines lazily, I sat limp, waiting.

“I need to find my Ripstik, unless you want it.” She said like it had been on her mind for a while.

“I’m too scared of skinning my knees.”

“I think it’s in Sara’s car.”

Her hand reached for keys on the table, she stood and walked slowly to the door. I turned my head to the window and gazed down to the street where Mary’s figure was reduced to a blur through the condensation covering the glass.

When she came back, she was cradling the two wheeled toy in her arms. I followed the sounds of her footsteps down the hallway and into the bedroom where she had been staying for the past month. The small lamp on the bedside table weakly illuminated the scene of a luxury squatter packing to leave: a mountain of Free People clothes surrounding the tote bag filled with pill bottles and Juul pods and her stuffed animal she brought from home. The room was otherwise plain, a single poster on the wall: a page out of the New York Times read “500 days of summer tv.” The grey desk in the corner was bare, aside from a single pencil and an open can of diet coke.

The clock on the wall read 4:03, indicating her time to leave and we exchanged empty doomed frowns. I started down the hallway, leading, in my bare feet.

I let her struggle with the piles and bags and keys behind me through the hallway and out the door, down the three brick stairs and onto the grass border between the sidewalk and street. Mary caught up to me. She put her bags into the back of her mother’s white Highlander and wrapped her arms around me.

I remember our embrace like this:

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I’ll miss you.”

She squeezed me tighter.

“I’m going to cry the whole drive.”

“I’ll cry myself to sleep.”

“I want to know everything. When you’re doing good, when you’re not, the drama.”

“Okay.” I choked out, surprised by my shaking. Hearing her say that, my body relaxed into hers. I realized I had forgotten to breathe. “I want to know everything too.”

“Have fun, okay? Senior year.” I couldn't see her wholly; strands of dyed blond hair cutting lines through my vision. It sounded rehearsed, but the way she was shaking begged me to believe it. Mary's usual vocal control was gone.

We broke apart and stood facing each other and I had only just realized that we are the exact same height, which inspired me to examine our feet. Mine, pale, long sharp toenails sticking threateningly towards her, covered in dirt and dead grass, hers in the white sneakers, socked heels sticking out of the back. Before I could bring my gaze back up to her face she pulled me in again this time more desperate and crying, without saying anything.

Around us: the nothing sounds of a sleeping street. Hums of power lines, a far away beat. This could have been forever or a second. I looked at Mary with an inescapable frown like a cartoon come to life. I could only understand this love as pure intensity, and her leaving caused a heartbreak more serious than any romantic one could.

I held my mouth open like a toddler and said something I couldn't remember after; it was such a tired approximation. Then I walked away. By the time I turned around, engulfed in the still rising steam, she was already leaving.

My vision blurry with tears, I turned from the curb and walked up the brick path to the front door. Inside, I stumbled into my bedroom and dragged my bare feet against the stained beige carpet, and sobbed. This was the tradeoff of believing in temporary forevers.

I felt agony in my stomach, as heavy as a boulder. The pain was unbearable. I lowered myself to the floor, curled into a ball and rocked myself to sleep.

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August 21st 2021, 5:47am

When I could bear to open my hazy eyes, a grey slender figure hovered in the air above me, edges wavering as its dimensions changed. Its form was humanlike, but without the

boarders, blending into the air and the walls. Filling all the space like a gas, it held out a spindly hand.

After a moment, I realized its familiarity, its weight and the way it floated so close to me shifting closer to me, humming with the same vibration I felt when Mary hugged me for the last time. Had the sinking feeling escaped from my body?

Working hard to convince myself of my own sanity, “pathetic” my mouth said to The Feeling and it only smiled and kissed my forehead above the dripping frown frozen on my face.. I didn’t feel any better, but the perception of The Sinking Feeling outside of my body allowed me to believe in my own lightness.

The Feeling put an infinitely long arm around me and behind me and above me to rock me deeper into itself. Lines started to appear where its body had once been, something like the kaleidoscope vision of pressing your eyes closed too tight. The Feeling was shifting, dancing, contorting its misty body into cloud shapes, its haze floating closer and closer to me. I could feel time running through me, like it was trying to get away from the two of us. I had no idea how long The Feeling had been doing this dance.

The haze fell still. Then it spoke:

“These are spectrums,” It said, its voice like feedback through a stadium speaker. I trembled at the sound.

“Of what?” I asked, feebly.

“Nothing to everything, Everything in between.”

I couldn’t see anything, lost in the heavy gas of the Feeling. I couldn’t tell what was supporting me anymore; I couldn’t see any floor through the haze. I couldn’t smell the must of my bedroom anymore and it felt like I was floating; no part of my body touching the floor.

“Where am I?” I begged the Feeling.



I tried to wake myself up, simultaneously I started to believe that this undisclosed location might be an inescapable reality.

“You mean ‘when’ are you.” The Feeling corrected me. I realized now the voice had come from the inside of my head.

Anxiety bubbled up inside me; a sour burp, I was momentarily distracted from when the Feeling began to move. If it was human I would have thought it was a dancer, the way the cloud in the shape of an arm twisted rhythmically above its head, the fog making up its body expanding and contracting like someone was breathing the smoke in and out.

The Feeling, dancing closer to me, forced open my mouth and climbed over my tongue and wiggling its way down my throat into my stomach, clouding my eyes with a darkness spotted like a midnight sky. The clouds around me began to swirl. A silent scream flew from my throat. I worried the deafening silent cry would wake my roommates, and upon investigating, would find me swallowing the Feeling whole.

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9pm, August 23rd, 2020

With The Feeling sitting back in my stomach, vision returned and I began to recognize my surroundings. I wasn't in my bedroom anymore. I felt a couch seat underneath me. When I could focus my eyes they were staring into the TV playing *Glee*. Living room appeared around me, in all its chaotic glory. I was sitting between my two roommates. “You’ve been here before,” The Feeling told me from my stomach. I realized then that I was inside my memory. Last August settled around me steadily.

It's 9pm, judging from the post-dusk glow in the dark living room. My fingers gripped the ridged lining of the couch, less worn than the one in my present life, but still faded and dirty.

My roommates were laughing next to me. I started laughing too, but I hadn't heard the joke. I could feel the panic in my cheeks as I forced a smile and looked left and right trying to find the route of the joke. Sara noticed my confusion and showed me a video on her phone, but my vision was still blurry and I couldn't make out what it was, so I waited for her to take the phone back and erupted into laughter anyway. She returned to leaning back on the couch and placed her feet on the crowded coffee table: old water foggy water glasses, someone's pasta bowl stained red from marinara sauce, a dirty bong covered in stickers.

Meanwhile, the Feeling sat propped up in my gut reminding me of how Taylor is looking at me from the coveted corner seat of our worn grey couch. The Feeling grounds the contents of my stomach into a pulp making a terrible guttural noise. I bent over to hold the noises from my stomach in. Taylor's mouth was red from the wine she had at dinner with her boyfriend and she was grinding her body into the couch seat in circular motions along with the showtunes playing from the TV. The residual dye from red hair covering her neck in maroon grime matched the rim around her mouth. The excess fabric hung around her frail figure looked like a costume. I knew what was coming.

I look down at my phone expectantly and in the same second I receive a message from a single cushion length away from me.

"I think about kissing you all the time" the text read under the contact name "Taylor!"

The first time I received this text, I was embarrassed and flattered and receded into my mind trying to determine if I felt the same way. Now, I was numb. The sense that this was all fake and something surreal about it made me question whether she was real or a figment like the Feeling.

It was three weeks after Taylor had moved in, half way through August's reincarnation, two months after the start of our lease. The distinct dampness in the air stuck to the walls and my

skin and when I could remember to inhale, moisture came in with the heavy air, in a trademark late southern summer fashion, tricking me into forgetting I had just been displaced in time. I remembered with a sharpness: I hadn't met Mary until the spring that hasn't come yet.

Forgetting Taylor's proclamation momentarily, I reached to my face, stunned by its dryness, and the hints of baby fat sticking to my jaw and cheekbones that I hadn't noticed had dissipated over the past year. I didn't have to meet Taylor's eyes to see the intensity with which she was peering through me. I grimaced, but maybe it came out like a smile, based on the pink teeth she showed me. My fingers sent back "haha thank you" without my instruction, just like I had the first time. Unwilling to bring my eyes to her face, still unsure if I was dreaming, my body got up to leave.

"I'm tired" I announced. "I'll see y'all tomorrow."

The cover of "Don't Rain on My Parade" blared through the television screen as I made my way up the stairs. I returned to my bedroom I had just left, but this one was different. Containing objects I had discarded, lacking decoration I put up in the last year. I checked under the side of my bed for the hole I made kicking through the drywall during a bad dream last September. The wall was whole and my mouth hung open finally realizing the severity of my current situation: I went back in time. My stomach turned and I thought I would be sick but instead it grumbled to inform me as if through an intravenous line "*this IS your reality.*"

August 24th, 2020, 9:17am

Taylor texted me in the morning: "I'm sorry Fran, I know I crossed a line." My fingers moved without trying, typing back: "it's all good." It was what I said the first time. I tried to delete it. I didn't want to say that. I wanted to say: "Something is wrong and I am not supposed to be here but I am and I don't know what to do, about this about you." But using all my energy I couldn't force my finger to press the backspace. I was stuck trying to change the message until it

finally sent “it’s all good.” against my will. My body picked itself up and put on its favorite outfit and walked itself to a class that bored me the first time I took it. It dawned on me that changing the past is a dangerous game and maybe my lack of agency is for the best.

Taylor didn’t mention the text again, and I couldn’t if I wanted to, but the line was regurgitated back to me by The Feeling often, like a shot to the head. “*All the time.*” She put her arm around me when we watched movies. Came into my room to borrow a shirt and said “It looks so good on you I don’t want to see it on me.” Her arms bent around me, alone in the kitchen, stone-faced, a centimeter away, she changed course last minute and reached past me to grab a handful of chocolate chips, from the bag sitting propped open a foot behind me.

September 2020- December 2020

Time was passing and I couldn’t keep track of it, I was so bored with its repetition. There was something comforting in having to make no decisions, not what I wear or eat or if I turn in my assignments on time, everything was predetermined, and I had no control whatsoever. I learned that like a movie I’d already watched with some intensity, I was going to have to sit through it. I was unable to act any differently than the first time I had experienced this year, and had little desire to, having read Ray Bradbury too many times. Sometimes I coerced myself into forgetting I had done it all before, until the great Sinking Feeling made it difficult for my feet to leave the ground. My parasitic Feeling was particularly unsettled when I would climb out of the bathroom window onto the plateau part of the roof and hug my knees into my chest in an attempt to offset this weight pulling me closer and closer to the slope leading into the ground.

The boredom of this repetition alleviated only when I got high. Waiting for my roommates to vacate the shared living room to perform this ritual, I would meticulously pick apart pieces of bud and roll them into a Virginia Slims inspired joint and take a hit. The smoke

would inevitably lift me up above fallen broken shades, beyond the dust covered fan holding desperately onto the ceiling, into the rafters, invisible.

I decided from above I didn't have to care about people and their feelings. I decided I couldn't. The decision came to me in the first November, and by the second incarnation of this epiphany I had almost completely allowed myself to forget this rewind I found myself tangled in.

Holding myself accountable, only to me, The Feeling, and occasionally the organs that kept us both company, I spent most days high. Both my eyes would stare mesmerized into my warped reflection from outside the window surrounded by trees with pink flowers, peaked slated roofs, my body mirrored into the sky; an excess piece of blue. This surge of power faded back into the familiar Sinking, and the ritual began again, smoking my sweat out of me, allowing me to believe that maybe one day I could inhabit the body that carried me, genuinely.

January 14th, 2021, 10:55pm

When I met Mary, at a house party in January, everything changed.

"I feel like we've met before." She told me after we were introduced. This wasn't what she had said when we met the first time at this same party on this same day some undisclosed distance away at this point. When we had met the first time, she was shy, holding her hand out awkwardly telling me her name before asking me mine and saying she didn't like parties like these. This was the first time I had heard something new in the last five months since she left. I was too shocked to speak, too out of practice in saying anything new. After a long moment of surprised staring I squeaked out: "Yeah me too."

We sat on the couch in silence during that party and I resisted the urge to poke her, wondering if maybe she was a figment of my imagination. I wanted to press her, asking how she knew me, if she remembered the summer we spent inseparable, but the logical part of my brain knew the connotations that come with telling someone new that you think they might be a time

traveler too. I stayed quiet and asked questions I already knew the answer to: what do you study, what are you doing in this city, what do you think of the people here. They were all questions I had asked the first time, but when she answered I felt like there was some slight variation, accompanied by a look she gave me, eyebrows raised and a sly smile she didn't try to hide. I couldn't prove it, but I got the sense whatever happened to me happened to Mary too.

Our conversation ended when the party died down and someone turned the lights on. We said goodbye with a wave and I walked home with my roommates, body moving without me. As soon as I left Mary's presence, I was back to my control-less state subjected to the actions and decisions my past self had made.

February - May 2021

I spent almost every day with Mary after that. We had gotten close quickly in the first iteration of this year, but this was different. I was motivated by the access to my voice and body that was stripped away from me for long to spend all my time with her. My roommates were surprised by my level of animation around Mary. I wanted so badly to tell them "it's different with her. I am not confined." But I couldn't tell them that because I did not say it the first time around and even if I could I'm not sure if it would have made things better.

We watched Groundhog day and she released a blood curdling scream when Bill Murry jumped off the building. I jumped in my seat. Then she laughed and looked in the eyes and said "I knew he was gonna do that." I rolled my eyes and laughed, thrilled by my own surprise.

June 2021

Days bled together through the spring into familiar summer heat. Taylor moved out and Mary moved in and agency re-entered my body. Slowly, with Mary somewhere between the walls I felt myself growing into the person I was so long ago, when I first got moved back, freedom returning for small choices at first, picking a different grocery line, deviating slightly

from the recipe, saying “all good.” instead of “no problem.” Sometimes I would make the wrong choice just because I could, ignoring my alarm, dropping little grains of rice onto the stove without picking them up just to see them all light on fire one by one.

July 27th, 2021 7:49pm,

“Sometimes, I feel like I’m stuck.” Mary told me in the Dairy Queen parking lot. From the passenger seat of her mother’s Highlander, her door open, she sat between me and the sunset, light creating the illusion she consisted of only shadows, and I realized it had been so long since I thought about The Feeling. I remembered at that moment what it felt like when she left. Tears filled my eyes and I had to swallow three times before answering:

“I feel the same way. What do you mean though?” I asked her, wondering if this would be the moment she would confide in me how time moved her.

“I don’t know. Like there is something else controlling me. But the something else is also me. Is that what you mean?” She looked at me and her shadow was covering my body completely. The rest of the car was overflowing with golden light, but I was sitting in complete darkness.

“Yes. Do you know why?” I could tell I was shaking and a small line of vanilla soft serve had started to run down my thumb onto my wrist. I couldn’t hold the cone straight.

“Brain chemistry.” She said, shrugging. “Mental illness. Idk though.” She said the last part sarcastically.

“Yeah, checks out.” I said matching her tone.

I would wake up with fingernail imprints in the palms of my hands, dreaming with force I could sink my claws into the extra time I got with Mary and keep it close to me. Blood was always stuck under my fingernails and in my fresh white sheets and spent considerable time

filling the bathtub up with warm water and bleach. Any animosity I had for the Feeling for sending me back in time dissipated as I summer-salted into August like a riptide had caught me.

August 21st, 2021 3:45am

When the final night came again, my unpreparedness crept up on me. I remembered the narrowing of my cheeks as I watched her collage her nativity scene: a field, an anatomical heart, a baby, cat food, stacked on top of each other like a pyramid. Different from the last collage she made in this same moment, but I couldn't remember exactly how. She looked at me, intentionally. For a second I thought she might cry, but then a more cathartic admittance of something I had always known followed instead:

"I've been here before" she told me, at 4:02, her voice shaking.

"Me too" My eyes watered and my bare feet got goosebumps. She didn't have to say anymore. We both knew. She got up off the couch and I followed her to Taylor's room while she painstakingly placed each item from her pile into her bag, laughing all the while. I laughed too, I couldn't help it. This time, I followed as she led me through the hallway out the door and down the brick stoop laughing, lighting the sleeping street up with sound. Tiptoeing, avoiding glass pieces scattering the sidewalk, I almost missed her head's turn back to look at me before reaching her mother's Highlander.

"What are you doing?" She asked me.

"I don't want to get my feet cut up," I said.

We repeated our departure dialogue like a rehearsed scene, and I knew before the car engine started this was the end. We would not start over, although I wished we would. I had never felt so connected to a person, to a moment, to a timeline. I turned around as her stereo blasted *Basking In the Glow*, inconsiderate of the neighbors asleep. I started to cry when the



brake lights reached the stop sign at the end of my block, and sucked the tears back in when I heard a scream.

“Hey Fran!” I couldn't breathe. “It's always forever for me!”

“Always this forever.” I replied, full of a new found life. Unable to stop my sobs from turning magically into eerie, rousing, maddening laughter, as her car turned off my street. The Feeling tumbled out of my stomach, just to kiss me on the cheek, and fell right back in, laughing with me.

## Acela

December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015

The Acela crashed on a Tuesday. It was the second Tuesday in December in 2015, 15 years after Amtrack unveiled their new train, and named it “The Acela,” an amalgamation of “acceleration and excellence”. Set to run the Northeast Regional route, from Boston to Washington D.C, stopping in Providence, New Haven, New York, Trenton, Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore along the way, but faster, with luxury seats and a bar cart. For 50 bucks more a ticket, the Acela appealed to businesspeople looking to save 15 minutes of commuting across cities up and down the east coast.

It crashed at 9:32 am, less than a mile from the 30<sup>th</sup> street station in Philadelphia. It had gotten on a regional track. No one knew if it was an accident or a way to make up the few minutes it was running behind. It passed through Philadelphia three times a day, every day. When it crashed, a mile from the Philadelphia station, it was going 102 miles an hour in a 45 mile per hour zone. 11 people died, 200 injured. It was probably just an estimate though. All day the train just laid there on its side, crooked in the middle. The cameras that captured the scene never got close enough to highlight its enormity. In the aerial photos they showed on the news the train was indistinguishable from a little boys neglected toy. A shot horse. A down wire. For the bodies left inside, a communal coffin. The next day the wreckage was gone and the Acela was running again, going 35 through Philadelphia.

\*\*\*

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Almost two years later, Riley sat in a field behind a shed facing the train tracks tying blades of grass into chains. Voices from nearby sounded like foreign music, something far away,

beautiful. A red plastic cup sat beside her. The earth began to blur the night into field. Blades of grass started to giggle, rubbing against her legs.

Riley sat against the wall of the shed. The vibrations from the speaker inside it echoed through her spine. The smell of the Crown Russe drifted through the walls too. Though maybe the intoxicating air could be wafting up from inside of her cup. The shed was hidden in a field through the small residential forest behind her classmates house. Riley didn't know his name. Only that his parents couldn't hear the blasting music from their bedroom, and when it got dark enough, you couldn't see the light from the house through the trees. It was the kind of property you only found the suburbs; acres and acres of uninhabited land.

Fifty feet away, a group of girls stood huddled over nothing, shoulders pressed together, arms wrapped around the space their cropped sweaters left exposed to the November wind.

"Someone should really go talk to her." Katherine said, her straightened blond hair bouncing curls back into it with every emphatic nod and tilt of the head.

"I did last time. I'm tired of this. We shouldn't have to take care of her every time we go out." Lyla said in a whispered tone, as if discussing plans of attack. There was silence, an exchanging of looks.

"She took too much, again." Katherine said, emphasis heavy on again.

"I think she's ok." Maya said from beside their glares. "I'm just gonna talk to her." She was holding a water bottle in one hand and its cap in another. Maya walked over to Riley across the yard, sat down next to her, rested her hand on Riley's shoulder and said:

"Hey Ri, you okay?" Riley's head was facing away from her, down and towards the tracks. Maya moved her head to Riley's angle but still couldn't make out any expression.

“I think he gave me something,” Riley said, slurring her speech. Maya could make out the edges of the words and filled the rest in.

“I think you asked for it, Ri. Henry wouldn’t give you anything you don’t want. Right?” Maya tried to sound nice, reassuring. She really tried. She held the water bottle right below Riley’s dripping nose. Maya moved the bottle when she noticed the persistence of the drip. Riley didn’t see any of it, focused on the absence of train on the tracks and the empty of the field between her and them.

“No no, Not Henry ... not this” She held her phone up to meet Maya's eyes.

“There’s nothing on there Ri, Do you wanna just tell me what you took?” She said talking directly to the blank phone screen.

“Actually,” Riley said, still slurring, but a new level of clarity accompanying her words, “I feel pretty good.” Her mouth twisted into a smile and the train went past them. From the end of the yard, through a layer of trees, the speed of the train blew their long hair back, Riley’s bleached green ends mixing with Maya's straight black hair, blowing loose pieces of grass into the air and drying the spit off of Riley’s exposed teeth.

\*\*\*

October, 2008

Seven years before the crash Riley sat in front of a desktop Mac tearing electronic pages off a digital calendar as fast as she could. The all white light reflected from the windows onto the Mac in the corner of the hallway. Riley, having never seen a computer so beautiful, in certain lights, mistook it for another window. They didn’t have tv, or any excess chairs, or many pieces of furniture or objects in the apartment Riley shared with her dad. It was a small place, the bottom level of a three story building. They lived below two Daves. Three rooms, one hallway.

According to the lease, the bottom unit had custody over the backyard, but sometimes Third Floor Dave would wander down with his girlfriend, Janette, and they would drink beers as Riley built houses out of sticks in rotted holes of old trees. Holding her eyes open long enough to see spots of dust caught in the light float around her head, she called them fairies. Third Floor Dave was the bassist in a Good Band. He was a Cool Guy, a Short Guy.

The girlfriend, Janette was nice to her, and she was so beautiful. Button nose, always wearing sweaters and thin silver necklaces. She would dance around with Riley and the fairies. Throwing her arms up in the air, opening her mouth to reveal perfect smiling teeth. After, she would return to clinging on to Dave, arching her back, bending her knees so that just barely, in some lights, she could make it look like she was no taller than the gelled up tip of Dave's hair.

Second Floor Dave would come to the backyard too sometimes, until he had to go to court, a driving thing. Riley heard him tell Dad in the stairwell. It wasn't his fault, but he had to prove it. It was a young girl. He didn't want to know if she died or not. She sat at the Mac hearing his voice crack, telling Dad:

“She was 22, man.”

“Hey, it was the wrong time, the wrong place, you didn't do anything wrong.” Dad said to Second Floor Dave. Riley was already in 3044, clicking through the years, hearing the “woosh” of each year ripped off its virtual spine, as fast as she could. Until Dad walked back in, looked at the screen, said:

“Don't waste the mouse batteries. It will all be over then anyway. Everything you know.” But her birthday would be on a Saturday. Christmas on a Tuesday. Leap year.

\*\*\*

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Riley came tumbling back into her body. A parasite. An old memory. Christmas on leap year. Jesus was born in the spring. She got sick and she had to get sick. So she puked up something purple, dark and heavy into the gopher hole in a backyard. It was a tragedy, \$15 dollars, or 15 milligrams, she couldn't remember, so she mourned both. She took the cup of thick liquid from next to her, swished it around in her mouth and spit it down the hole following her mystery vomit, positioned herself carefully on top of her two crooked legs, bending in at the knees, and walked inside.

Riley was back in the two story shed, the ugly accessory to someone's mansion. The small rooms were crowded with familiar bodies but they felt alien to Riley. The shed was destroyed, the remanence from a rowdier party remained; holes the wall, broken chairs and fallen tables, spray painted hallways.

"Yo! Where's your boyfriend!" Someone yelled from the hallway. Riley knew the call was directed at her through the crowd.

Riley looked toward the voice, but her eyes didn't follow. Her vision showed a view from above, looking down at the party. The question came from Harry from the corner, looking for Henry. She had a faint memory of texting Henry before she puked, but whatever she said was moving through the dirt with bile and liquid by now.

Satisfied with broken vision, she tilted her head back, which felt hollow, knees weak, feet untethered to the floor. From her aerial view, she could see the glares people threw at the space her body took up.

Henry was in the corner now with Harry, she wasn't sure how long it had been. They were facing the wall. Holding hands with a piece of something in the middle. Looking at each

other, intoxicatingly, for a place to practice their love: cutting the lines of whatever they were cherishing with one of their mothers credit cards.

Henry was a sweet boy, until he was high. It worked out for Riley, who was quiet until she wasn't, and then she couldn't remember what she would say. Disjointed visions from their past fights included laughter. She didn't bring it up in case the laughter was the fight, or part of some punishment she'd inflicted on him after.

\*\*\*

June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017

They met at a party. A year and a half after the crash. Riley came out of the bathroom fucked up with some guy whose name she couldn't remember. She was picking up from Miles then, so she couldn't remember much. Henry had waited outside, asked her if she was okay. Riley said yeah, and asked what he's doing. He didn't answer, just opened the door wider so she came in with him. They did a line and fucked on the toilet seat. She smiled something scary and he left wanting to hide.

But then he saw the smile when he closed his eyes or when he tried to focus in class or whenever his vision went blurry. It felt like the lines. Better sometimes. A week later he decided he had to see her, had to see the smile, again, figure out if he remembers it right. He found Riley's handle on Instagram after 15 minutes of searching, sent a message and she came over that night. She didn't talk much. So they smoked until she said smoking makes her slow and she needed something to bring her back up, so they did a few lines and she started talking:

"I used to live in the city" Riley said unprompted.

"Wasn't that a while ago?" He said, having examined her Instagram account thoroughly and remembering the graduation photo from Neshaminy Junior High.

“I mean not really” Riley responded.

“Well you lived in Neshaminy in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, you’re a junior now...”

“No. I don’t really think about it like that, like to me, I lived there last year, sometimes, I lived there yesterday.” She followed with. Henry laughed. She couldn’t tell if it was genuine.

“I mean that’s not really how it works though right? Like you moved in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, that was 3 years ago” He said through a goofy smile.

“I don’t know... I don’t think so.” Riley responded, eyebrows furrowed. He ended the conversation by taking her confused head between his hands. Then they were dating.

\*\*\*

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017

That was six months ago. He would text her on the second of every month: some heart eye emojis, a few carrots and a three, call her babe or something. She didn’t get it the first month, but sent the same back anyway. By the second month she figured it out. By the third, she was expecting it.

She found Henry through the crowd by the wall of the shed next to Harry and pressed herself into him.

“Hey I need something I’m getting slow.” She said keeping her eyes down forcing her mouth into a smile as her arm reached around his waist, and his fell around her shoulder. Riley looked up as a final plea. He agreed without speaking. She followed Henry down a crowded hallway with Harry trailing behind them.

They entered an abandoned walk in pantry. Nothing was on the few shelves on the wall, the rest were piles of wood on the floor. A stone countertop half demolished sat on cabinets with



all the doors kicked in. Henry unfolded some plastic wrap uncovering loose white powder and held his hand over a dirty counter.

“I was out of bags” he said struggling to keep every piece collected in the plastic coating the space between his spread fingers.

Once the lines were cut on top of Harrys phone screen, and the dollar was rolled Riley did the first one, unquestioned. Her head came back up already floating. Eyes above her body, she tried to roll them back into her head, but they went further back, into the field, to the train tracks, kept going back, to before.

\*\*\*

February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016

Three months after the crash Riley got back on the train, the east line, from the South Philadelphia station to Neshaminy. She was paranoid. Riley spent the night before in the city showing friends from middle school the narcotic habit she picked up since her move to Neshaminy. She was still out of it when she rushed to the train station the next morning, Riley slipped on the stairs down to the station from the street and fell into melted snow sludge. She cursed loud enough for the woman next to her to look down in alarm, and shift her body further away from her.

Her hip formed a minor bruise, and pants were soaked and dirty in the last seat in the train car. Riley opened a message from Miles. It read: “It’s a pain pill” “like for cancer and shit” “you would like it.” She didn’t want to google it, worried her searches were being tracked by some over protective train bystander. Mostly she didn’t care to learn more, didn’t care about the body that was carrying her, any more than the metal of the train car that carried her slowly into

the suburbs. Riley agreed, she would like it, and he said “first one on me.” It was a ploy of course, as all things are, but also something for free.

Four months later she was ripping her bed skirt from the box spring, and tearing apart the grey floral sheets her mother had chosen from Restoration Hardware, crying, screaming, pleading, for another pill, or something huge to swallow her whole. She had gotten high the day before and hid the remaining piece of pill in the beige carpet. Riley threw everything in reach to the center of the floor, an athleticism she had never shown before.

Once everything: her dresser, stand-alone sock drawer, backpack, desk, bookshelf, ornamental boxes, closet, stacks of old textbooks, notebooks from middle school, posters electronics, bedding, everything sat united in the center of room, the vastness of her empty space stared back up at her.

Through Riley’s tear-blurred vision, it looked like the ceiling began to cave in, in slow motion, and she thought that’s how her brother died; under debris. Panicked, she got into her closet, surrounded by old dolls and struggled to breath. Their apathy was comforting. She allowed herself to participate in the fantasy of unliving. Fossilized in plastic, uncanny observers, that could be her; operating a semi human body resting in the place between living and ceasing to be.

\*\*\*

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Riley came back into her body in what once was the living room. The shed had a family she understood this from the faded wallpaper and lazy boy covered in beer and the decorated dusty mantle above a boarded up hole.

Most people had left by then. Riley wasn't sure what time it was. The few people left looked like they were moving in hyper-speed. She had woken up angry. Riley leaned back and using all the force she could muster, brought her limp hands up to her face. She tried to cry, but felt some worse feeling wriggle loose with the tears and the snot so she sucked it all back in again.

Then she missed the worse feeling. Riley wished she held onto it for just a second. It felt something like moving, flying, the train, like wings.

Her thoughts were fragments when she managed to push her body out of the chair. She walked outside the shed back into the field. Henry was there. Harry wasn't.

“Hey.” She said quietly from 15 feet away.

“Oh yo!” Henry responded. “I was looking for you!”

“Yeah, I was upstairs.” Riley responded, dryly.

She pressed her back against the wall of the shed and slid down onto the grass. She watched the train tracks. Focused hard on them until she could conjure a train passing. The wind wasn't there accompanying the vision. She looked away. Katherine was standing in a group closer to the tracks, hair curling, whispering to Lyla. Maya had Harry's arm around her and was pulling, or being pulled into the tree barrier between the property and the tracks. Reaching into her pocket she found a speck of pill and took it without thinking.

\*\*\*

December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015

When the Acela crashed, it was going 102 miles an hour. It was late, by like 5 minutes she thought. It was a morning train. It was a Tuesday. Riley lived on Fitzwater street then. Dad

and the kid and the wife and her. She got up late. Dad had woken her up three times before she moved, he was dressed in a suit she'd never seen.

It had been a few months since Kyle died. Riley assumed that her mother, in pieces, could not bring herself to celebrate his life. Dad, engrossed in his new life, hadn't had the heart to acknowledge the pragmatic vile of ashes sitting in a box in his unfinished basement. But then, one Tuesday in December, he wore a suit and told Riley: "It's time for school, I'll drop you off at the station"

Riley went back to sleep.

\*\*\*

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017

"I know you have emotions." Henry was sitting next to her, against the wall of the shed, when she entered her mind again. Arm already wrapped around Riley's inanimate shoulder, except she hadn't lifted her head up to make room for it under her neck, so it sat drooped over her head and curved around her body awkwardly.

She didn't respond, uninterested in defending her humanity.

"Do you think..." He paused. His breath was soaked with vodka. The Citron bottle hung loose in his hand. He had finished the powder without her; she could smell the acidity when he leaned his face into her hair, it made her throat itch.

"You could ever love me?" He finished and immediately brought the empty bottle up to his lips, tilted it all the way up, nothing came out. He sighed. She looked away.

She thought about it. She kept thinking about it.

\*\*\*

Summer, 2006

Riley knew love; a memory. A brother, the runner, carrying her on his back, what felt like a mile before slowing down. She'd never gone that fast before. Before the apartment. Before the funeral. Before the crash.

\*\*\*

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Ever? Riley's spit was thick and it felt like glue between her lips. Her nose was so stuffed she couldn't breathe through it any more. She was stuck. She tried to gasp, as Henry examined the blue gradient at the bottom of the bottle. If this was love, it didn't taste like she remembered. It was slow and sour and conditional.

She could love him... she thought, thinking about the plastic wrap and the way she fit underneath his arm. She thought about how his body felt, steady, holding her upright. Riley couldn't see him, but she was looking right at him. She waited for her vision to catch up with her face. She could only see the aerial view: like a picture, the two of them, up against the shed, staring at each other. Except she wasn't seeing. Riley thought about the question, and then she forgot the question, and then she remembered the crash.

\*\*\*

December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015

Riley should have been on the Acela. But they left without her. Didn't ask her to come. She would have said no if they did.

\*\*\*

She put her hand in her pocket and between old crumpled wrappers and crumbs she found half a pill in a piece of plastic and held it in her hand. It was the rest of the pill she threw

up, and the last of anything she had left. Henry's arm was too heavy pressing down on her neck. The world began to blur, speeding past. All she could feel was his arms' pressure on her head.

Riley thought about the pill in her palm. She thought about the crash. She could feel Henry's arm get hotter each second of her silence. He opened his eyes as she took the pill fragment.

"Yeah, I think I could," Riley said with her eyes still closed.

\*\*\*

A Fall Morning, 2007

"Elliott Smith stabbed himself in the stomach with a kitchen knife," Dad told her one morning over HoneyNut Cheerios as *Between The Bars* played through the Mac speaker, sound drifting into the kitchen from the hallway.

"His girlfriend found him. He was 34. It was only a few months after you saw him. It was the first concert we took you to. You were a baby, but Kyle wanted to go and your mom liked him too. The opener went on and he was in the back playing the drums for them, and then they switched. Shows aren't like that anymore."

"Why'd he stab himself?" Riley asked, mouth full of cereal.

"His girlfriend was the only one who really knew him. He had addiction issues, you know what that is right?" She nodded, unconfident, but he didn't look at her for a response.

"Well she said that it was sobriety that killed him." He sipped his coffee and looked out the window on the other side of the kitchen. "Everyone thought it would be the drugs. But he wasn't like Cobain or those guys. Fame wasn't for him. He couldn't take it, especially sober. You should know the story, if you're a fan."

“That’s sad.” She said, staring up at Dad, who was still looking out the small window above the kitchen sink.

“It is sad, but that’s where the art comes from. The haunting, echo vocals, the poetry.” He pointed to his head with two fingers; “It’s all up here.”

\*\*\*

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017

“Riley. Is that the 40 milligram from earlier? Please tell me it's not.” Henry said eyes open now. Eyes still dilated, speech clearer.

Riley responded in the slightest nod. Slow, higher now than before.

“You saw my texts. You said you threw it up already. What is that? Where did that come from?”

“I guess I got it a while ago...” her voice was lower and sounded further away.

“Dude I do not want to watch you die right now. Why did you have to do this? What the fuck am I supposed to do?”

“Harry! Dude come over here” Henry’s voice echoed past the space her body took up, limp on the grass.

“What’s up dude!” Harry came out of the bushes rubbing his lips, Maya following a foot behind him.

Henry was freaking out. Sweating, stammering. Standing now. He half jogged ten feet to meet Harry, Maya standing in the shadow of Harry's body.

“I think she took the stuff that she got from Miles.” Henry said, hollow.

“Okay.” Harry said, before realizing what it meant.

“Oh shit” Harry continued. Words stretched out and slowed.

“Wait what’s going on?” Maya interjected, standing outside of the world of the boys’ conversation.

The three of them looked over at her body slouching and crooked, head hovering like magic a few inches above the grass. Henry didn’t look away. Harry turned to Maya.

“It’s probably fine. It’s probably fine. She’ll be fine.. right?”

“What’s going on?” Maya said, forcefully now.

“Miles told us, me and Henry and Riley, not to take the stuff he sold us. He said it could be laced. Like probably laced.” He rushed the words out.

“Laced with…” Maya asked.

“Maya, I’m so sorry but I don’t think we have time to do this right now. I think something bad is going to happen, I don’t want to be here when it does. What the fuck do we do?” He ran his hands through his already greasy light brown hair, and stared into the grass.

\*\*\*

December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015

When the Acela crashed Riley was on it. It wasn’t her fault. She was just a passenger. Part of a larger tragedy, a mass accident.

They were going to the funeral. The one she wasn’t invited to. But she got up when he woke her. She saw Dad in black. A suit she didn’t know he owned. She said “I’m coming.” And didn’t wait for a response.

She got in the back of the car. Between the kid and the wife. Tom was driving. Dropping them off at the station. He put his arm around the headrest of the passenger seat and said:

“Hey guys, it’s all gonna be okay. Kyle was a great guy. You’re gonna be just like him.”

“Kyle killed himself, Tom.” Dad said, dryly. “Don’t tell them that.”



Riley flinched when she heard that. She got the faint sense someone was trying to wake her up from a nightmare, but then she remembered that's how she felt since Kyle stopped living. He did everything too fast, running, driving, drinking, Riley trailing close behind. Without him, she couldn't bring herself to try to keep up.

They got out of the car. The wife said "thank you, Tom." Reaching through the open window to hold his free hand in both of hers.

Together, they walked into the station and onto the platform. She had on the long black dress the wife told her to wear. Black zip up hoodie over the dress. The Acela pulled into the station, and Dad said:

"Four minutes late. I wonder if they'll make it up."

It wasn't a long ride, just to Delaware. They could have taken the regional train, but the Wife was working at the station so they got a discount and she said the Acela had bigger seats and the kid was going to want to run around. Riley didn't have a ticket, since she hadn't been invited. The wife said something like:

"I'll try to get the discount on board but I don't know if it will work. I wish I knew Riley was coming earlier, Rob."

"I figured she wouldn't." he said "She doesn't like to miss school." He said as if Riley couldn't hear them.

She untangled some headphones she found in her pocket. Black wires blending into the zip up. *No Name #1* was already playing when she put them in her ears. "*Saint-like with your warning, leave alone, you don't belong here.*" Elliott Smith whispered to her softly, layers of voices on top of each other.

From the platform Riley could see the beginning of the curve. They got on the train. She looked at the kid. She looked at the wife. Dad was sitting facing the window. The Acela picked up speed, she had never gone that fast before. Watching the city blur beside her, the corners of her mouth broke out into a smile, muscles confused, having forgotten how to make the shape. Finally, she was going fast enough to move her back. Going back enough to catch the train.

“I love you.” Riley said through open lips to no one in particular and braced for impact.

## Mud House Loop

### After

“I love your tattoo” Sara told her, lightly following the lines on Name’s skin with her finger. “When’d you get it?” she asked.

Name could not remember when she got the tattoo. She knew she had it, but the question opened a sinkhole in her memory. It must have been after The End of her last relationship, but before The Breakup. The tattoo wasn’t bad. It was beautiful, actually. The piece sat on her sternum in the middle of her chest between her ribs. It was in the classic American style of tattooing, coined by old sailors so distant from common society they marked their difference, lust for women, and love for their mothers by piercing ink through their skin.

Name’s was a portrait of a woman, red bandana headband, eyes gazing down and to the side like she was looking at something next to Name’s hip. Her cheeks blushed like she was embarrassed to be looking at whatever she was looking at, and Name thought that must have hurt; getting the roseyness of her cheeks a perfectly faded gradient. The woman in the portrait was holding a handful of red flowers to match the bandana. Her hair was segmented into lines varying slightly in color, black and gray. Name loved her, the thick black outline creating the shape of a face using negative space above a single line indicating her collarbone, above flowers that cut off the rest of her body. Name could not remember when or where or why she had this woman imprinted under her skin.

Name was not a particularly wild individual. She drank to excess twice in college, once after a midterm sophomore year (on two and a half bottles of Mad Dog, she puked up purple and green in the dorm toilet and passed out under the bowl, woke up at 5 am to flush it and went back to bed), and once after accepting her job offer at a local gardening non-profit, where she was

paid just slightly above minimum wage after graduating top of her botany class (this time on a series of four ((big)) frozen cocktails at a restaurant where she ate only a salad and fries.) Neither of these times she had done anything out of the ordinary, anything to cause alarm, and more importantly; she was sure she didn't have the tattoo after either of those nights. Given her lengthy recovery time after those experiences, she was fairly sure that she hadn't been drunk any time in recent memory.

When thinking about the tattoo, and the mystery of it, and the impossibility of its existence being one related to alcohol, Name inevitably thought of Rebecca. Rebecca had wished Name drank more. She didn't say it like that, it's not exactly something you can say. But after The End and before The Breakup she would say things like "I just wish we went out more." "Did you drink more before I met you?" and, the worst one, "I feel like we never have fun together."

To which Name responded casually, "Yeah, me too." "Not really." "Yeah we should have more fun." Now, with Sara's finger tracing the outline of this American Classic woman, she wished she had responded differently. She wished she had gone out and bought some of the cheap wine that Rebecca drank when her friends came over to watch The Bachelor and Name stayed in their shared room. But she didn't do that, and though she sometimes forgot the persistence with which time moves, she knew she couldn't change it now.

"I'm not sure." Name responded after a long pause. "Sometime last year." Sara smiled in a way Name interpreted as meaning she didn't have anything else to say.

"Do you have any tattoos?" Name asked.

"No but I want one." Sara responded. "I want my mother's wedding ring on my wrist." She pointed to a spot inside her wrist right next to the edge of a row of four silver bangles. "I want it actual size, I think it'd look really cool." Name nodded.

“It’s really a beautiful ring. Let me see if I have a picture.” Sara pulled out her phone and started scrolling. Name looked around the room in the downtime. It was her room, she had to remind herself. Huge pile of pillows next to the bed with a wooden frame that Name made herself after staying up all night the first day of her lease to transform stolen lumber from the construction site next door into something resembling a bed frame. It was poorly constructed though, and often fell apart. From the bed, next to Sara, Name settled her gaze momentarily on the piece of wood sticking out of the side where she hammered the final piece together too hard at 5 am, splintering it, waking up Rebecca from the mattress on the floor of their barren living room. The reminders of their life together was Name’s only roommate and it always left a mess.

The books that sat on the shelf looked heavily used, but Name couldn’t answer a question about even one. Rebecca was the reader and Name had a vague memory of asking her to take her books with her, in order to avoid the embarrassment of owning such props and the memory associated with her feet up against the windowsill reading for hours every Sunday. It was the small things too. Name’s shirts that – while technically belonging to her – she only kept in the closet because Rebecca wanted to wear them, and the birthday card from her mom that included a 50 and instructions to take Rebecca out to dinner.

Name took most of the art off the walls after Rebecca left, leaving only an old proof sheet from when she took photography in college and a particularly beautiful business card from a coffee shop in Seattle. Rebecca was the hoarder, the keeper of items, but when she left she only took three boxes, two suitcases, a duffle bag and a backpack. After three years of thing-accumulation she left Name to deal with the rest, which Name did hastily and without even a touch of the sentimental consideration Rebecca had for material possessions and kept only the essentials, plus a decently sized collection of empty decorative bowls, little pretty tins, and the

clear plastic containers Rebecca kept her makeup in. Anything you can buy at the container store Name kept, just in case she met someone who needed a place to keep their tchotchkes. But all the containers sat empty and out of place on her otherwise bare counters and dresser and desk and that reminded Name of Rebecca too.

“It’s just so meaningful because I was made from the love that is symbolized through the ring. And it’s Opal, my birthstone, which obviously they could have never known at the time.” Sara was still talking about the tattoo she didn’t have yet and found a picture of the ring on her phone, in a Facebook post celebrating her parents 50th’s wedding anniversary.

“That’s awesome.” Name responded, adding what she felt like had to be the appropriate inflection. “That’s, like, really sweet.” she added even more genuine sounding (she hoped.)

“Yeah so obviously this tattoo would mean a lot to me so I’m waiting until I find the right artist to get it.” Sara continued. Name resisted the urge to ask her age, realizing just in time the kind of judgment tone that would carry, and how they are getting to the age where you can’t really ask that anymore.

This tattoo conversation marked the end of Name’s second date with Sara. They’d met at the garden Name worked in. Sara was a teacher and brought her class on a fieldtrip in early February and Name stood quietly while a college intern took the 2nd graders through the soil beds and told them about their history and all the exciting plants that lay waiting in the frozen dirt. The kids looked bored and Name was silent until the intern asked if there were any questions and one kid asked if they ever had Zombies come out (the wooden markers in the bare dirt looked like gravestones so Name couldn’t blame the kid) and the intern, caught off guard, looked to Name for a response, who said “No.”

Sara sent Name a very nice email after the field trip. Name responded, cordially. Sara responded back asking if maybe Name wanted to get a drink the following week and Name couldn't think of a reason not to so she agreed.

Their first date wasn't awkward, Sara talked too much. Name was relieved. She got an IPA she didn't really like the taste of, and she bought Sara a red drink that Name had never heard of. When the young bartender asked if she wanted to keep her tab open or closed and she said "what?" twice before Sara explained the concept to her.

"Closed." She said before understanding the connotations.

They went back to Sara's after the single round of drinks (she lived close) and they kissed with their clothes on like teenager and talked about their coming out stories for a few hours, although Names only took like five minutes: "Yeah I always knew, I wore a really weird mix of boys and girls clothes growing up, a lot of pink camo. I didn't really know being gay was an option until high school when I had one of those 'best friendships,' you know what I'm talking about?" Sara nodded emphatically. "I guess you could say I stayed in the closet until college. I had a pretty serious relationship right after college. It lasted a while."

Name didn't know why she said that last part. She'd told the story before, it always came up somehow. Her cousins asked her, every date she had ever been on, sometimes an intern would ask her about her home life and she used to tell them she lived with her partner and since she and Rebecca split she missed the feeling of reacting to what they assumed was the most vulnerable of admissions. Many of them would start telling Name about their own sexuality. Name gave her advice where she could but would always come home telling Rebecca, "These liberal arts colleges needed to do a better job of teaching kids not to talk to their bosses about their sex

lives,” to which Rebecca would laugh and tell her, “No, it’s sweet. They are opening up to you. They look up to you.” Now Name tells the students she lives alone and they say “Oh. Ok.”

Sara’s story unfolded over multiple decades and boyfriends and girlfriends and partners and parents and discriminatory comments and hours, until Name told her “I have to be up early tomorrow, but I loved hanging out. Let’s do it again.” Sara pressed her pink lips against Name’s and told her, “Definitely.” Name grabbed her car keys off the table and walked out of the house tasting remnants of grenadine and tequila, but at this point she couldn’t remember what the drink was called.

Name had a few other tattoos, ones she got in college. She had an abstract linework piece on her arm. Her friend's friend designed it while she was still in school studying art history, she owned galleries now, but Name could never remember her name to look up where and how prestigious they were. She had stick-and-pokes she and her high school best friend gave each other on the first night they smoked out of a soda can in Name’s garage. They fell asleep before they were done though so the design, which was supposed to be a smiling face, was just a curved line on her hip. Name got another one, of a vine crawling up her leg, after she graduated college, but after she started at the garden, with her vine peeking out from high socks while she cleared out bushes covered in soil, she felt it was a little too on the nose. “Nothing you can do about it now.” Rebecca would tell her.

Name thought a lot about her tattoos after the first summer with her vine. Her first year in the garden she felt like such an idiot. When bugs inevitably flocked to her ankles, she got embarrassed. No one even noticed it, but Name was embarrassed in front of the bugs and plants and felt like ink in her body was such a weird homage to the nature she worked in. It was a



strange choice that a lot of the time she couldn't believe she made. But by the next summer, when she rolled up the leg of her worker's Dickies she didn't mind it there. She even liked it. It had felt like a decade since she got it, she couldn't believe it was only a single year when Name's old roommate sent a time stamped photo of her smile on the leather table; her teeth all exposed and cheeks flushed, like she'd been publicly exuberantly praised.

Name wasn't sure if she just wasn't paying attention or if no time had passed, but Sara was looking at her and Name was looking down at the woman on her chest. For a second she got this unbelievable feeling looking at the woman, like this could all be a dream or a computer program or she could be acting out scenes on a futuristic moving tattoo in the inner part of someone's knee five hundred years into the future. Then she thought about her own smile on the tattoo table and the vine that was still wrapped around her leg, ink spread out now into her skin. She decided that maybe she isn't actually herself any more; all her skin cells must have regenerated and although some overlapped she decided this must mean she was not the same, until she caught another glimpse of the ink slowly dissipating into her skin.

"Did you ever take a philosophy class in college?" Name asked Sara, still unable to figure out if she had been zoned out for a socially acceptable period of time.

"Yeah I did. I was terrible though. I always focused on the wrong thing." She said through a smile.

"I didn't think that was possible in philosophy." Name responded. "But I don't know, I never took a class."

"Why do you ask then?" Sara said

“I guess, I was wondering, have you ever heard of the boat problem?” Name asked. Sara just shook her head and laid back on the pillow, still alert, eager to be lectured to by Name who was almost always silent.

“Pretty much; it's like when...” Name was not the most eloquent speaker. “Imagine a boat made of wooden planks.” She finally spit out. “Every year one or two wooden planks get replaced. The boat sails for twenty years and on year 21 all the planks are replaced. Is it still the same boat?” Name asked her.

“Is the sail also replaced” Sara followed with.

“Yes” Name said.

“Is it the same wood?” Sara asked.

“Yes” Name said. “Well, the same kind of wood. Not the actual same wood. They take the wood off the boat and replace it with new wood.”

“But like from the same tree?” Sara asked.

“Yes. Same type of tree, not the same tree” Name clarified as best she could.

“Yeah, I guess I would say it's the same boat then.” Sara answered. “Because like it does the same thing, it probably looks similar enough.

“What really makes something the same though? Like what it does and looks like? Or what it's made out of?”

“That's a good question. That's the philosophy though right? There's not gonna be a right answer?”

“Yeah. There won't be.” Name could tell she sounded unnecessarily ominous and she didn't like how much she'd been talking.

“Why do you ask?” Sara asked her.

“I don’t remember.” Name responded. Too quickly. Sara looked suspicious. It was true though, Name thought. It was the truth in the way the boat being the same was the truth, but it was also true that Name was being reminded of Rebecca the Philosophy major and Name was still mourning any memory of Rebecca commenting on or touching or looking at or existing alongside the chest tattoo that was, at this point, overridden by Sara’s examination of it.

“Really?” Sara asked.

“Yes.” Name said through a smile and Sara sat up, maybe not believing her but looking at her like she might just melt in to her, a step Name was not ready for, so she put the smile aside and turned her head up to the blank wall where there once hung a low hanging tie dye tapestry, until Rebecca said it made the room look smaller.

Name was lost in the memory of staring up at the empty ceiling with Rebecca silent next to her sometime after The End and before The Break up. Name was startled when she turned to see Sara staring at her in a sickeningly sweet way.

“I’m getting really tired.” Name said to defuse the sweetness, which worked, and the scary sultry smile dissipated into a neutral shape and then into a repressed frown. She agreed to leave and Name said something kind, but she couldn’t remember any of it right after and walked Sara out and without putting her shirt on. She stared at the woman for some indefinite period of time and then decided she needed answers.

Name adjusted the pillows, reclined against them, called Rebecca without thinking much about it.

On the third ring Name got nervous and on the fourth Rebecca picked up.

“Name, I told you not to call me.” Rebecca said into the receiver in a harrowed tone. Her voice sounded more so much like Name’s it shocked her. Name decided that Rebecca's voice sounded more like her voice than her own did. She asked her question:

“Reb, I have one question. I am so sorry to call you. I didn’t want to. But I have to know, do you remember my tattoo? A woman on my chest?”

“Name, I don't want to hear about women on your chest. Please don’t call me.”

Rebecca’s response didn’t clarify to Name if she had ever seen the woman, and even if she had said that she didn’t know that wouldn’t have helped anything, Name knew that between The End and The Breakup she wasn’t really looking at Name and that time was sunken somewhere Name could not remember much of at all.

Name started to cry, she couldn’t remember the last time she did. Probably the breakup. All snotty and cracked. “I can’t remember... I can’t remember when. Do you know? Please. I’m sorry. I just can’t... remember.” Name was too busy heaving to hear the line go dead.

### The Breakup

Rebecca left on a rainy Tuesday. Name came home from the garden covered in dirt and mud and Rebecca had her moleskin journal open, pen in hand, backpack on, sitting on the couch. She looked up at Name from the journal when she walked in and Rebecca’s face fell and eyes widened like she hadn’t expected her and had been caught in some heinous act. She stood up and faced Name and Name thought maybe this is the first time in years they had stood facing each other. She loved it. Then the speech started.

“Name, these past three years I have lost track,” Name remembered thinking this read like a satirical poem, Rebecca clearly didn’t read it out loud beforehand. Name knew if she had she would have abandoned this whole concept and left a very short note.

“Time has slowed being with you, and at the same time I don’t know where it’s all gone. You were the first girl I’d been with. The first girl I loved. I don’t know if you know how much you meant to me at one point.” Name did know.

“But I’m not that person any more. I’ve grown up. I don’t recognize the person I was when we first started dating. I don’t feel connected to the life we share anymore. I will always have love for you.” The speech ended and Rebecca had tears in her eyes and then Name blinked and stood there processing the monologue that had just been performed, and then the tears were gone. It was like she sucked them back up like a particularly mucusey snot and her face went stoic and Name wondered if she had imagined it, or if so much time had passed in the silence they had dried.

“I understand.” Name said. Rebecca walked towards Name with her arms out and Name could not help but recede into herself. Rebecca wrapped around Name pinning the top of her arms down, so she lifted her forearms up at the elbows and gave Rebecca’s back a small pat. It felt sarcastic and she regretted it immediately. Name did everything she could in that moment to keep from falling into pieces held together by her.

Rebecca left, saying something about how she would come back for her stuff the next day. The door closed behind her and Name took all her dirty clothes off and laid flat on their spotless wooden floors and at first she was quiet and still and then she was banging her fists and stubbing her toes with every kick and all covered in mud she rolled around until the sun set and she couldn’t see the mud and got into bed all muddy and did not think twice about the mess.

The next day Name woke up surprised that The Breakup took so long and realized it was the first time she slept naked in longer than she could remember so she got in the shower and started cleaning the mud out of her house and stayed naked while she did. She felt like a baby

that had just been born. She also felt better than she had since The End. Name examined her body in the mirror, noticing the shorts and wide sleeve tank top tan that looked permanent it was so pronounced. Name was slender in the moment, more slender than she had ever remembered being. Name did not notice a tattoo of a woman on her chest.

### The End

The End came so slowly Name couldn't realize it was happening. Rebecca stayed late at work. When she was home she cried in the shower, and Name would stand at the door ready to console her but Rebecca came out, stoic, and told Name, "Nothing is wrong." Face still puffy.

Name said nothing about the lie and gave Rebecca space and then more space and more space until Name was gardening until 10pm one cloudy Friday night, hands aimlessly tearing through soil she could not see. Afterwards, Name slept in the shed in the back corner of the garden even though she knew bugs could crawl through the holes in the wooden walls. She woke up when the sun rose and filled all the useless holes and had expected to ignore Rebecca's calls, but she hadn't called even once. She went home when she knew Rebecca would be at work, but she wasn't. She was home and she was upset, Name could tell by the way she sat on the couch. Name was covered in soil and she couldn't see straight; she had been staring into dirt for so long. In that moment she hated Rebecca and she could tell by the way she held her face out, showing off the worry, that Rebecca hated her too.

That was The End. But neither of them said it. They went out to dinner and talked about Rebecca's friends and recent episodes of The Bachelor and Name spoke briefly about new plants and how they were expected to flower and which would survive the winter. They watched movies with their hands touching, devoid of meaning. They had sex with their eyes open. They

did this once when they first got together, right after college. Rebecca told Name through a giddy high smile: “Close your eyes, darling, you’ll see too much of me.”

Name wanted to cringe when she said it but she didn’t and that’s when she knew she was falling in love.

Now, she was cringing at Rebecca’s silence and the magnitude of her despondent gaze at something on the wall behind Name’s naked body. Name, unsure of where to put her own eyes, gazed down at her own body, and saw the tattoo woman looking down at Rebecca. And this, this memory, is all she has of the woman on her chest. She of course had no pictures from this disappointing night, nothing to prove it was there in The End, nothing to prove it wasn’t during The Breakup.

#### After

Sara left and Name was still shirtless and she went to the bathroom and turned on a light to examine the woman. She smiled at the woman who did not meet her gaze. She was so beautiful. Name wondered if she ever had a name. Who invented her, and what was she looking at. Questions about its proximity to Name were forgotten as Name became enamored with the reflected image of the woman in the mirror. Name did not spend much time looking at herself, she didn’t see the point, most of her days being gazed at by plants and Sara’s phone number linked in her email cemented the belief that she didn’t need to. Her tattoos were all she needed.

Name tried to go to sleep and after tossing and turning and taking the pillow case off of the pillow soaked with Sara’s scent, she succeeded.

“Name, please wake up.” A voice that sounded so much like her own she thought it was Rebecca, spoke to her softly from very close by. Her whole body hurt like it had been hit with a truck and she listened to the voice and woke up.

“Name, wake up. Please.” The voice said please like it meant it like a request and not a demand so Name knew it was not Rebecca.

“Name, you are lost” Name was now terrified, a feeling she did not often experience.

“Name, you are lost. You got lost, Name. It is okay.” The reassurance from the voice did not make her feel better. Name started to believe maybe she was hearing voices, in the medical sense. She was so terrified the voice was coming from inside her mind she told herself, “This is a dream.”

“Name, This is not a dream.” Name could barely hear the voice, and wrapped her arms around her body, which was much more frail than she remembered it. The skin was rough and sagged slightly. Name was struggling to breathe. She was so terrified and she held her chest tight like she could push her heart back into her body.

“Shhhhhh” she pushed out of her two very dry lips into the dark air, to whom she could not tell. Then with her hand on her heart, where the woman lived, and felt the skin loose and without seeing she felt the woman's facial features feel much less beautiful than they used to be. She felt the closing of two very small lips. The woman had listened. The woman was silent for a while. Name’s heart rate slowed down and the feeling like she might just die right there in the dark was quelled slightly.

“Name, do you remember your name?” The woman whispered through Name’s fingers. Name responded to the voice politely, feeling like she owed the beautiful woman whose face and body she has ruined with her own permanence an answer:

“Yes, it is Name.”

“Name,” The woman responded in a way that felt like her mother’s hand combing through her hair. “Name is *not* a name.”



Name thought about what the woman said. Name is a name, Name thought, Name is my name. Name name. She could not remember why she said name the second time.

“My name is Rebecca, Rebecca is my name.”

“No,” the woman said, face melting off of chest, “Your name is not Rebecca, Rebecca was your wife. You are your own person, Name.”

“Sara” Name said, this time unsure.

“Sara is not your Name, Name.” The voice told her.

“Do you even remember Sara now?” The voice asked her. And Name; holding on to her last circle of memories, remembered.

After

“I love your tattoo” Sara told her and followed the lines on Name’s skin with her finger, using the most minimal pressure possible. “When’d you get it?” she asked.

## Kids, Anymore

“We’re not kids anymore.” Maggie told me in front of her father’s desktop computer displaying the lyrics to a Coldplay song. We shared a swiveling desk chair in the second floor suburban home office, evening light pouring through the windows creating a glare on the screen.

“I know.” I said defiantly, although I did not know. Middle school had started that morning. Maggie started 7th grade and I started 6th. Her mother picked me and my mother up at 7:25 and dropped us off at the illusive building across the street from the elementary school. All the same kids were in my grade, but after fifth grade graduation and an eight week stay at various summer camps up and down the East Coast, and back to school shopping at the Abercrombie in the outlet mall, an air of newness accompanied all the nervous sixth graders. By the time the school day was over, I was too stunned to believe that it had really happened. We were finally *middle schoolers*. Maggie aged out of her crunchy 12 person elementary school the year before and we jumped around her kitchen when her mother had told her she would be attending my middle school. The excitement ate away at me until we got to school and learned that we would be separated by a stairwell and confined to our respective grade hallways.

We were only three weeks apart in age though, I had thought all day. Our mothers, who had been best friends since they were our age, always told us that I was old for my grade and Maggie was young and we were practically the same age. We met for the first time the day after I was born. Maggie was 3 weeks and one day old and we had been best friends ever since

The first three weeks of September was the only time of year Maggie is older than me. I was self-conscious. It was so petrifyingly embarrassing to be 12 years old. Our parents' friends would ask our ages, it hurt to admit when they would commend Maggie on being a teenager and me on being "so big."

Hoping if I remembered Maggie's declaration "we're not kids anymore" consciously, walking into the middle school building I might convince everyone else it was true. Those three weeks she had on me felt more important than ever and I reminded myself to rely on her for guidance. Jeans I got in fifth grade exposed the black hair growing around my ankles and Maggie told me I should ask my mom soon to teach me to shave. She wore leggings and white sneakers with soft t-shirts that had a scooped hemline so when she raised her hand too high you could see the skin above her hip.

The longer I spent in the middle school building, the more I dwelled in the stairwells to smell the eighth graders above me and hear the cascade of laughter bouncing between walls. Stairwell made of metal distorted the sounds, so by the time it got to me on the first floor it sounded inhumane. Screeches or high tech machinery. Listening for long enough, their sounds outside of the stairwell started to match, calling each other names that sounded gibberish. The boys arms were constrained by the sleeves of their too tight t-shirts and the girls midriffs exposed in cropped sweaters and tight jeans. They didn't look to me like any people I had ever seen and the more I observed the more they revealed their true identities: aliens.

Easton Middle School contained two kinds of beings: the children and the aliens. The three graders shared a building, divided among three hallways separated by flights of stairs. Sixth graders were still soft, not yet scaley, with kind, wide eyes, mostly remembering "please" and "thank you's". Eighth graders were truly terrifying. Other worldly entities, always screeching and scary and asking "What are you looking at?" glaring something evil and horrific. Seventh graders contained multitudes. Some were pimply and awkward, and others small and meek, at least in September. Their transformations were laying wait just below the surface and it was

more terrifying than the Eighth Graders to think that at any second they could become a new threat.

A

After two weeks of not speaking to or about her, my mother suggested we all sit down and talk about this. Alien around me swallowed little bits of me at a time and soon I would lose myself, I knew for certain. Alien back pain. Alien bug eyes. Alien friend. Alien girl. Alien pimples that I did nothing to cause. All the same kids were in my grade, but after fifth grade graduation, an eight week stay at various summer camps up and down the East Coast, and back to school shopping at the Abercrombie in the outlet mall, an air of newness accompanied all the nervous sixth graders. Also has a crush on Jack. Although Jenna was complaining like I've heard human children do. Always spewing vitriol and curse words and innuendos I got embarrassed trying to understand. "Amma just told me." "Amma seems to think you called Jack a name." And it reverberated around me. And now that I was a teenager, her age still eclipsed mine and when I hugged her I felt something hard between us, those three weeks. Any more. Anymore, we are not children. Arms seemed to extend past my body and fall out of my bed.

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Maggie told me on our fifth day of middle school she had a crush. She told me on Friday after we both got off the bus at my stop and walked to buy frozen yogurt. Except Maggie had alerted her new friends in her grade of our plan and they had all followed. Now the frozen younger shop by my house that usually contained toddlers being babysat and kids post soccer games, was packed with 7th graders, and me and Maggie who for some reason I could not place in 7th grade category. Looking around, I decided I must be the youngest in the shop and felt both unfathomably cool and exceptionally inferior. She confessed the crush as we sat on the bench in

the back watching the boys get sample after sample filling the little paper cup up two feet tall with coffee flavor frozen yogurt.

“His name is Jack, do you know him?” Maggie asked me and I nodded. I rode the bus with him in elementary school and he would get on and off at the stop before mine. He had soft blue eyes, a quiet face and a sister he always looked after on the rowdy bus every day. She looked over to him as he carefully selected the lightest toppings from the bar, I followed her eyes and noticed how remarkably human he looked.

B

Before I could answer Maggie she leaned closer into me, totally obstructing my ability to take nervous bites of my chocolate caramel twist. “Bitchhhhhh.” But I had never thought to do anything about having a crush. But I never did. But I nodded and hugged her and said: “I have to go back to class.” But I wasn’t. “But Jenna seems nice so I don’t know what to do.” But then I remembered what she told me as we stared into the screen taking turns singing along to Coldplay sharing her dad's desk chair.

But then she asked Jack out the next Friday in the same yogurt shop and one of the more alien 7th graders made a joke I didn’t understand and while they walked together around the block holding hands. But then she said: But whatever it was I didn’t regret it when I opened my mouth to whisper in synth: By the time my eyes got to her face, I thought maybe I was looking at her older sister, lines were drawn around the shape of her eyes with thick black ink, highlighting the glare she directed at my Harry Potter t-shirt. By the time the school day was over, I was too stunned to believe that it had really happened.

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“What do I do?” Maggie asked me. I had had a crush before, I thought. His name was Louis and he sat behind me in 5th grade and we both had to go to recess late to do our timed math tests in private, supervised, with assistance, in order to go on to middle school. His presence breathing heavily and smelling of sulfur behind me made me cry slightly less when we were discharged onto the playground with only 15 minutes left to swing. But I had never thought to do anything about having a crush. It was just something you possessed like my mother’s decorative china, there was nothing you could do about it other than observe it being. Before I could answer Maggie she leaned closer into me, totally obstructing my ability to take nervous bites of my chocolate caramel twist.

## D

“Did you know Maggie has a boyfriend?” Dreams of her body all green and naked like when we were babies visited me nightly, but she had me strapped down to a metal table in an all metal room and her synth voice repeated:

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“Jenna S. also has a crush on Jack. She says she wants to ask him out but her parents won’t let her have a boyfriend. I know my mom wouldn’t care. But Jenna seems nice so I don’t know what to do.”

She had been spitting little bits of sprinkles in my ear and I did everything I could to keep from shaking them off of me like a wet dog. My mouth hung semi open and I became very aware of the speed in which my yogurt was melting into lukewarm liquid.

## E

Easton Middle School contained two kinds of beings: the children and the aliens. Eighth graders were also becoming more alien. Eighth graders were truly terrifying. Every time I saw

her in the stairwell I filled up with anger. Everyday I wake up in a body more alien. Everything hurt. Except Maggie had alerted her new friends in her grade of our plan and they had all followed.

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“Wait, your mom would let you have a boyfriend.” I asked, sounding more like a baby than I would have liked, hoping my jealousy wasn’t bleeding out of me in some kind of green alien goo.

“I mean she hasn’t said that but I don’t think she’s ever said I couldn’t do something. She’s nice like that.” She said it like it meant nothing.

I knew it was true though. It has always been true when Maggie wanted an ice cream at the end of the pool day right before dinner and when she wanted me to stay over even though they had family visiting. My mother was not like that, although sometimes I think she wishes she was. She once told me, after complaining that Maggie got to see *Something Borrowed* in theaters when we were 11 even though it was PG 13, “I must just love you so much more.”

“My mother didn’t look out for me like I look out for you.” She told me in that same conversation.

H

He had soft blue eyes, a quiet face and a sister he always looked after on the rowdy bus everyday. Heat building into fever in my face. Her mother agreed. Her mother picked me and my mother up at 7:25 and dropped us off at the illusive building across the street from the Elementary school. “His name is Jack, do you know him?” His name was Louis and he sat behind me in 5th grade and we both had to go to recess late to do our timed math tests in private, supervised, with assistance in order to go on to middle school. His presence breathing heavily

and smelling of sulfur behind me made me cry slightly less when we were discharged onto the playground with only 15 minutes left to swing. Hoping if I remembered Maggie's declaration "we're not kids anymore" consciously, walking into the middle school building I might convince everyone else it was true.

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There's no way Amma would allow Maggie to have a boyfriend. I'm still a human child, so Maggie must be too. But then I remembered what she told me as we stared into the screen taking turns singing along to Coldplay sharing her dad's desk chair. "We are not kids anymore." Any more. We are something else.

But then she asked Jack out the next Friday in the same yogurt shop and one of the more alien 7th graders made a joke I didn't understand and while they walked together around the block holding hands. I looked for a human child's face and couldn't find one. Although Jenna S. was complaining like I've heard human children do.

I

I agreed. I allowed my mother to hold me, saying something about "people grow up at different times." I asked genuinely. I asked, sounding more like a baby than I would have liked, hoping my jealousy wasn't bleeding out of me in some kind of green alien goo. I broke apart my two very chapped lips and allowed a smidge of sound to come squeaking out. I continued totally unprompted. I couldn't help it, I let it slip out before I knew it was coming and I think maybe I was possessed by an Alien host, or maybe I was just filled with too much sourness to keep in. I couldn't speak.

I didn't ask her why she didn't ask. I didn't have anyone my age to stand with so I stood behind a group of three girls turned into themselves. "I didn't realize you girls were dating." I



don't really know what she meant. "I don't think that's true." I had allowed myself to think it a few times. I had had a crush before, I thought. "I had my first kiss like just now." I had never heard my mother say "bitch" before.

"I had to tell you before going to class." "I heard she doesn't even like Jack, she just thinks he'll make her popular." "I heard she had two boyfriends at her old school." "I heard she's a slut, she even kissed one of them."

I kept dreaming of crop circles, beams of light, her voice through a synth, so loud. I knew it was true though. "I know." "I know my mom wouldn't care." "I know you wouldn't do that." I let myself think momentarily before feeling guilty about it. I looked for a human child's face and couldn't find one.

"I made it up, I made it up, I made it up." "I mean she hasn't said that but I don't think she's ever said I couldn't do something." "I must just love you so much more." I never called anyone a bitch, although after learning the word when someone brought a speaker on the bus in 5th grade. I recognized these girls, especially the one who said the last comment. I repeated. I rode the bus with him in elementary school and he would get on and off at the stop before mine.

I said as quietly as I could, hoping that maybe they didn't hear me but some higher power keeping track of who I stood up for did. I said defiantly, although I did not know. I said shortly. "I think I'm falling in love." I told my mother, brows furrowed into wrinkles. I wanted to shake her and scream:

I was in bed. I was self-conscious. I watched as her eyes narrowed into those of Aliens and I didn't finish my yogurt, I threw it in the trash on the walk home as my own eyes burned from the salt of tears I could not let fall. I'm still a human child, so Maggie must be too. "Imadeitallupimadeitallupimadeitallup."

“In 7th they do.” Instantly, in front of both our mothers, my body turned green. It happened Tali!” It has always been true when Maggie wanted an ice cream at the end of the pool day right before dinner and when she wanted me to stay over even though they had family visiting. “It is all made up and I am so narcissistic.” It was in the stairwell. It was just something you possessed like my mothers decorative China, there was nothing you could do about it other than observe it being. It was only three weeks, it was practically nothing. It was scheduled for next weekend. It was so petrifyingly embarrassing to be 12 years old. “It's not true, tell them all it's not true, why would you say that? It isn't true.”

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When they came back around the block from the opposite direction, Maggie was smiling something like pride and it reminded me of her mother telling us she is so bright and good at math.

The sidewalk outside the yogurt stand was littered with little alien children hybrids all cooing and parting like the Red Sea to let the newest couple through. I didn't have anyone my age to stand with so I stood behind a group of three girls turned into themselves.

“I heard she had two boyfriends at her old school.” “I heard she is a slut, she even kissed one of them.” “I heard she doesn't even like Jack, she just thinks he'll make her popular.” I recognized these girls, especially the one who said the last comment. I broke apart my two very chapped lips and allowed a smidge of sound to come squeaking out.

“I don't think that's true.” I said as quietly as I could, hoping that maybe they didn't hear me but some higher power keeping track of who I stood up for did.

“What did you say?” The girl who looked the most alien turned and said to me.

J

Jeans I got in fifth grade exposed the black hair growing around my ankles and Maggie told me I should ask my mom soon to teach me to shave. Jenna S.

K

“Kids don’t date in 6th grade.”

L

Listening for long enough, their sounds outside of the stairwell started to match, calling each other names that sounded gibberish. Looking around, I decided I must be the youngest in the shop and felt both unfathomably cool and exceptionally inferior.

\*\*\*

On my 13th birthday, on the Fall solstice, I woke up feeling extremely 13. Everything hurt. My face felt hot and my stomach was burning and I thought in that single moment between dream and reality that maybe I was somewhere on fire. But I wasn’t. I was in bed. Waiting for the day to start. *My day.*

Maggie had texted me to meet her in the basement vestibule halfway through my first day as a teenager and one day before our 13th year freindaversary.

“It happened Tali!” She said bouncing up and down. “I had my first kiss like just now. I had to tell you before going to class. It was in the stairwell.” She looked at me and I knew what she meant, elation, lust maybe, but all I could see was the green tint on her skin and the stairwells distortion of her noises. But then she said: “I think I’m falling in love.” and it reverberated around me.

Shaking, terrified of what was growing in her as her eyes narrowed with desire I didn’t understand and the words came out all foreign, but I believed her. Alien girl. Alien friend. I let

myself think momentarily before feeling guilty about it. But I nodded and hugged her and said: “I have to go back to class.”

My face was still red with sticky hot embarrassment and a bit of disbelief that this was the reality I was living in as I walked into the classroom. Then I remembered her words “We are not kids anymore.” Anymore, we are not children. And now that I was a teenager her age still eclipsed mine and when I hugged her I felt something hard between us, those three weeks.

She is right, as she always is. Everyday I wake up in a body more alien. Alien bug eyes. Alien back pain. Alien pimples that I did nothing to cause. Arms seemed to extend past my body and fall out of my bed. Alien around me swallowed little bits of me at a time and soon I would lose myself, I knew for certain. Eighth graders were also becoming more alien. Always spewing vitriol and curse words and innuendos I got embarrassed trying to understand. The principal would come out of his office and tell them: Please, please, until 3:30, please pretend to be human. We are human here.”

## M

Made me sore from turning, tangling my sheets. Maggie aged out of her crunchy 12 person elementary school the year before and we jumped around her kitchen when her mother had told her she would be attending my middle school. Maggie asked me and I nodded. Maggie asked me.

Maggie didn't tell me not to go to the frozen yogurt shop on Fridays, but she didn't sit with me or come with me to pick out my flavors and when I thought she was behind me, I turned to tell her I choose the tart original flavor instead of chocolate, but it was the Alien girl who turned around her and chuckled to her friends. Maggie didn't ask why I stopped going for yogurt.

Maggie had texted me to meet her in the basement vestibule halfway through my first day as a teenager and one day before our 13th year freindaversary.

Maggie has a boyfriend. Maggie started 7th grade and I started 6th. Maggie told me in front of her fathers desktop computer displaying the lyrics to a Coldplay song. Maggie told me on our fifth day of middle school she had a crush. Maggie was 3 weeks and one day old and we had been best friends ever since. Maggie was on the bench outside, sharing yogurt with Jack, pocketing the five her mother gave her.

Middle school had started that morning. Mouth full of tooth pieces. *My day.* My face felt hot and my stomach was burning and I thought in that single moment between dream and reality that maybe I was somewhere on fire. My face was still red with sticky hot embarrassment and a bit of disbelief that this was the reality I was living in as I walked into the classroom.

My mother asked and my mouth hung slightly open. My mother called me into her office when I returned. My mother corrected herself. “My mother didn’t look out for me like I look out for you.” My mother didn’t tell me if Maggie had agreed or her mother forced the reconciliation, but like she said, her mother didn't make her do anything. My mother was not like that, although sometimes I think she wishes she was. My mothers face filled with pity alerting me that tears had started falling down my cheeks before I noticed my crumpled features and ocular pain that accompanied my sobbing.

My mouth hung semi open and I became very aware of the speed in which my yogurt was melting into lukewarm liquid.

N

Now the frozen yogurt shop by my house that usually contained toddlers being babysat and kids post soccer games, was packed with 7th graders, and me and Maggie who for some reason I could not place in 7th grade category.

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Maggie didn't tell me not to go to the frozen yogurt shop on Fridays, but she didn't sit with me or come with me to pick out my flavors and when I thought she was behind me, I turned to tell her I choose the tart original flavor instead of chocolate, but it was the Alien girl who turned around her and chuckled to her friends. Maggie was on the bench outside, sharing yogurt with Jack, pocketing the five her mother gave her. I watched as her eyes narrowed into those of Aliens and I didn't finish my yogurt, I threw it in the trash on the walk home as my own eyes filled with the salt of tears I could not let fall.

My mother called me into her office when I returned, "Did you know Maggie has a boyfriend?" "Yeah." I said shortly.

"Amma just told me. I didn't realize you girls were dating."

"We're not dating," I told my mother, brow furrowed into wrinkles. "Maggie has a boyfriend." I repeated. Heat building into fever in my face. "Oh yes that's what I meant." My mother corrected herself.

"Kids don't date in 6th grade." I continued, totally unprompted. "In 7th they do."

Q

Obviously. "Oh yes that's what I meant." On my 13th birthday, on the Fall Solstice, I woke up feeling extremely 13. Once when she dropped a stack of her favorite china she had imported from somewhere, stomping all around the kitchen making little cuts in her feet. Other worldly entities, always screeching and scary and asking "What are you looking at?" glaring

something evil and horrific. Our mothers, who had been best friends since they were our age, always told us, I was old for my grade and Maggie was young and we were practically the same age. Our parents' friends would ask our ages, it hurt to admit when they would commend Maggie on being a teenager and me on being "so big."

P

"Please, please, until 3:30 please pretend to be human."

\*\*\*

Maggie didn't ask why I stopped going for yogurt. I didn't ask her why she didn't ask. When my mother asked me where Maggie had been, I bit down on my teeth so hard I felt little pieces fall off into my mouth. Mouth full of tooth pieces. Tooth pieces loose in mouth, my mother told me Amma had called her and they had a conversation.

"Amma seems to think you called Jack a name." My mother asked and my mouth hung slightly open.

"What?" I asked genuinely.

"She said that Maggie said that you called Jack a" She paused. She whispered: "*bitch*." I had never heard my mother say "bitch" before. "Shit!" Once when she dropped a stack of her favorite china she had imported from somewhere, stomping all around the kitchen making little cuts in her feet.

"I know you wouldn't do that. Obviously." She said and gave me a look, seeing only a child in me. I couldn't speak. I had never called anyone a bitch, although after learning the word when someone brought a speaker on the bus in 5th grade. I had allowed myself to think it a few times.

My mothers face filled with pity alerting me that tears had started falling down my cheeks before I noticed my crumpled features and ocular pain that accompanied my sobbing. I allowed my mother to hold me and she said something about “people grow up at different times.”

I don't really know what she meant. It was only three weeks, it was practically nothing. Every time I saw her in the stairwell I filled up with anger. I wanted to shake her and scream “It's not true tell them all it's not true, why would you say that? It isn't true.” But I never did. Silently, I walked by, averting my gaze, scared of what I would see if I met her eyes.

Dreams of her body all green and naked like when we were babies visited me nightly, but she had me strapped down to a metal table in an all metal room and her synth voice repeated: “I made it up I made it up I made it up. It is all made up and I am so narcissistic.”

S

Screeches or high tech machinery. Seventh graders contained multitudes. Shaking, terrified of what was growing in her as her eyes narrowed with desire I didn't understand and the words came out all foreign, but I believed her.

She confessed the crush as we sat on the bench in the back watching the boys get sample after sample filling the little paper cup up two feet tall with coffee flavor frozen yogurt. She had been spitting little bits of sprinkles in my ear and I did everything I could to keep from shaking them off of me like a wet dog. She is right, as she always is. She looked at me and I knew what she meant, elation, lust maybe, but all I could see was the green tint on her skin and the stairwells distortion of her noises. She looked over to him as he carefully selected the lightest toppings from the bar, I followed her eyes and noticed how remarkably human he looked.



She once told me, after complaining that Maggie got to see *Something Borrowed* in theaters when we were 11 even though it was PG 13. She opened the door and I couldn't believe what she had turned into. She paused. She said and gave me a look, seeing only a child in me. She said bouncing up and down. She said it like it meant nothing. She said that Maggie said that you called Jack a:

“She says she wants to ask him out but her parents won't let her have a boyfriend.” She told me in that same conversation. She told me on Friday after we both got off the bus at my stop and walked to buy frozen yogurt. She was still wearing the jeans she bought when we went back to school shopping, but her body had changed and she filled them out more now and they clung to her tightly. She whispered: “*bitch.*” She's nice like that. She would say softly: She wore leggings and white sneakers with soft t-shirts that had a scooped hemline so when she raised her hand too high you could see the skin above her hip.

“Shit!” Silently, I walked by, averting my gaze, scared of what I would see if I met her eyes. Sixth graders were still soft, not yet scaley, with kind, wide eyes, mostly remembering “please” and “thank you's”. Some were pimply and awkward, and others small and meek, at least in September. Sometimes the synth voice would sound more musical. Stairwell made of metal distorted the sounds, so by the time it got to me on the first floor it sounded inhumane.

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After two weeks of not speaking to or about her, my mother suggested we all sit down and talk about this. I agreed. Her mother agreed. My mother didn't tell me if Maggie had agreed or her mother forced the reconciliation, but like she said, her mother didn't make her do anything. It was scheduled for next weekend.

I kept dreaming of crop circles, beams of light, her voice through a synth, so loud: “WE WE WE ARE RERE NOTTTT KIDSDSSSS ANYMORREE.” Sometimes the synth voice would sound more musical. The sound would surround me, like it was coming from inside my own my own head she would say softly: “imadeitallupimadeitallupimadeitallup.”

When my mother walked me down the street to her house one Saturday morning, the Alien Maggie in my dream had kept me up. Made me sore from turning, tangling my sheets.

I

The boys arms were constrained by the sleeves of their too tight t-shirts and the girls midriffs exposed in cropped sweaters and tight jeans. The excitement ate away at me until we got to school and learned that we would be separated by a stairwell and confined to our respective grade hallways. The first three weeks of September was the only time of year Maggie is older than me. The girl who looked the most alien turned and said to me: The longer I spent in the middle school building, the more I dwelled in the stairwells to smell the eighth graders above me and hear the cascade of laughter bouncing between walls. The principal would come out of his office and tell them:

The sidewalk outside the yogurt stand was littered with little alien children hybrids all cooing and parting like the Red Sea to let the newest couple through. The sound would surround me, like it was coming from inside my own head. The three graders shared a building, divided among three hallways separated by flights of stairs. Their transformations were laying wait just below the surface and it was more terrifying than the eighth graders to think that at any second they could become a new threat.

Then I remembered her words. There's no way Amma would allow Maggie to have a boyfriend. They didn't look to me like any people I had ever seen and the more I observed the

more they revealed their true identities: aliens. They were paired with a tank top she had made herself by cutting sleeves off of and a v into the neckline. Those three weeks she had on me felt more important than ever and I reminded myself to rely on her for guidance. Tooth pieces loose in mouth, my mother told me Amma had called her and they had a conversation.

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She opened the door and I couldn't believe what she had turned into. She was still wearing the jeans she bought when we went back to school shopping, but her body had changed and she filled them out more now and they clung to her tightly. They were paired with a tank top she had made herself by cutting sleeves off of and a v into the neckline. By the time my eyes got to her face, I thought maybe I was looking at her older sister, lines were drawn around the shape of her eyes with thick black ink, highlighting the glare she directed at my Harry Potter t-shirt.

W

“Wait, your mom would let you have a boyfriend.” Waiting for the day to start. “We are human here.” “We are not kids any more.” “We are not kids anymore.” (we're not kids anymore.) We are something else. We met for the first time the day after I was born. We shared a swiveling desk chair in the second floor suburban home office, evening light pouring through the windows creating a glare on the screen.

“WE WE WE WE ARE RERE NOTTTT KIDSDSSSS ANYMORREE.” We were finally *middle schoolers*. We were only three weeks apart in age though, I had thought all day. “We're not dating.” “We're not kids anymore.” “What did you say?” “What do I do?” “What?”

When my mother asked me where Maggie been, I bit down on my teeth so hard I felt little pieces fall off into my mouth. When my mother walked me down the street to her house one Saturday morning, the Alien Maggie in my dream had kept me up. When they came back

around the block from the opposite direction, Maggie was smiling something like pride and it reminded me of the diner with her mother telling us she is so bright and good at math.

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I couldn't help it, I let it slip out before I knew it was coming and I think maybe I was possessed by an Alien host, or maybe I was just filled with too much sourness to keep in. But whatever it was I didn't regret it when I opened my mouth to whisper in synth: "bitchhhhhh"

Y

"Yeah."

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Instantly, in front of both our mothers, my body turned green.

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