

to Zan

Ocoee

As she moved out from under the dusty bed, a nail caught the back of her dress. As it tore into her spine, Kinzie remembered. Twelve years ago, her best friend nailed up a small lantern to read by, fueling sleepless nights. The nail was still there, pushing that memory into the wood grain. Kinzie had the sudden urge to pull it out, and started to grab at the rusty nail. Her searing back made her angry, her memories made her angrier. She was alone under a bed she'd slept in all her life. She was alone on a bed she'd slept in all her life. It stands thirty-two inches off the ground. Made of apple-colored wood, it's not going anywhere. Her best friend was enrolled in a camp for troubled teens somewhere in the wasteland of Utah. Utah might as well be imaginary, she thought. There were stacks of unread letters on the nightstand. Honestly, I don't want to know how she is. Rubbing her bangs into her eyes, Kinzie sat a moment longer, chewing her tongue and spacing out. Then she walked over to the window and opened it. Removing a layer of dust from the windowsill with her finger, she traced a name. I've got to get out of here; I've got to do something. Looking out at the little houses hitting the side of the mountain getting tucked in. Grabbing her bag and taking the stairs two at a time, she felt an insane energy grab her by the intestines and pull her to the front door. There was nowhere to go, but she knew Chris would be around. He was always around and never sober and always had some to share. Sitting where he always sat waiting at the edge of the known world, Chris was smoking a cigarette and swishing his big toe deep off the edge of the dock. One of these days a gator's gonna reach up and eat that toe right off your foot. Chris gave a little snicker and whirled around, effortlessly knocking Kinzie down next to him. His beard glinted amber with droplets of spilled whiskey.

They spent their days this way, not saying much because there wasn't much going on anywhere.

You're going to leave soon, you're going to leave me here on this dock and you won't come back. Chris was in one of those moods today, a bulldog mood his mother used to call it. Kinzie didn't have the time for it. She laid back, letting the back of her head bump the green boards, and began to peel paint back with her fingernails. A splinter pushed its way into her heel, but Kinzie was used to the old dock and its mean streak. It creaked as Chris rolled towards her, the boards matting him. Kinzie stood up. It's too hot here.

She walked beside the boathouses, muddy earth splashing up and forming tiny islands on the hem of her skirt. There was a geode in her satchel, a gift from her grandmother. Kinzie pulled it out; it was warm and alive in her palm. Its insides looked like the emerald city. Or what the emerald city would look like if it wasn't painted on a piece of wood. The geode didn't make much of a splash when it hit the water. Sinking quickly until its light pockets could be mistaken for fish scales. A strange gleam caught her off guard as the rock disappeared. Suddenly, Kinzie felt silly for throwing it. She waded in deep, seaweed sucking on her thighs. Toes searched through the mud until they found the bumpy rock and brown hair flecked with gold curled up on the surface of the water as she retrieved it. Her stomach was growling as she walked back to where Chris was still sitting. Want to go to the Ready Market? He did a goofy backwards somersault and grinned, his beard and nose covered in dirt.

They walked together kicking up the fine dirt, which slowly became crumbly pieces of cement until they were walking on pavement. Their footsteps felt solid as they approached

the counter, the linoleum tiles echoing their movements with a hollowness that is unique to convenient stores.

2

By noon, the heat was unbearable in rural Florida. It was sticking to everything and filled Kinzie's mouth while she gulped for air. Legs dangling off the edge of the Ready Market's roof, Kinzie pulled skin off an orange. Chris was perched on top of the vent cover, steam from the unit pouring out under him. How can you stand it up there. He rolled his eyes and tossed a moon pie into Kinzie's lap. Well, a person can get used to anything, I guess. Kinzie watched the waves of heat roll up off the gravel roofing. The edges of the roof wavered; they were always at the edge of the world. Chris was talking excitedly, moving closer again. I discovered something. You won't believe it. Kinzie couldn't hear over the whirring cicada, over the coughing air conditioning vent. A way to travel, not like in a car, but through time. Kinzie was used to his stories. The cicadas were getting louder; his leg was touching. Citrus was piled at their feet. Peeling immaculate little pieces off a stolen orange, Kinzie remembered feeling slightly dangerous taking it from her neighbor's yard. They ran like a pack of dogs was after them, they ran like there was fire at their feet. When really, Mrs. Rose just stood at the window, peering through smoke-stained curtains at the thievery.

Standing up too fast, the diet cola fell off the edge of the roof. Instinctually they ducked, gravel digging deep in their palms and kneecaps. Show me the time machine. Kinzie laughed as she said it.

3

As he pulled the halved stones from his pocket, Kinzie regretted indulging the scientist. Chris pushed his glasses

further up on his nose, taking large, calculated steps. Those geodes were a gift from my grandmother, you know. Her complaints were waved off. The cicadas were even more intrusive here, in the field by the lake. Their wings beat heavily against the trees. Kinzie sunk down, letting the tall grass envelop her. Close to the ground, the dirt smelled like swampwater. Okay, that about does it. The geodes were placed in a square around them, looped together with an amber-green strand that was almost invisible. What is that stuff? As Kinzie tried to touch the spool in Chris' hand, he jerked away. Why are you asking questions? Who's the scientist here anyways? Well, you are I guess. Ok, now wait. Kinzie sighed. Then, the pebbles around them began to tremble slightly, as though the heat had created a mirage. But it was cooler in the grass, and just as Kinzie thought this, the geodes moved. Half an inch, maybe. But she saw it. Chris was grinning from ear to ear, his gums showing. He looked rabid. Do you know what today is? Do you? It's yesterday. Or maybe tomorrow. I don't really know how to control it yet. Kinzie was startled out of her thoughts and realized she was on her back on the roof of the Ready Market. I must have nodded off. But when she stood up, something was different. It was morning. The geodes were perched on the corners of the roof like gargoyles, but the string was gone. Without saying another word, Chris pushed himself over the edge. When Kinzie heard his feet hit the dumpster lid, she walked over to one of the geodes. It was warm, but not from the sun. Heat was pushing out of it into her hand. Kinzie recoiled as though she had touched a piece of the earth's center. She peered down at Chris, who was waving a slip of paper in the air wildly. It was yesterday's date, from the convenient store's rip-off calendar pad. So? Chris was overwhelmed in his deductions. His corduroys made a bracing noise as his thighs brushed together, pacing between Kinzie and the curb. We went back in time. Kinzie felt her insides lurch. She was

tired, it was sticky hot. I'm going home. But you can't, what if we get stuck? This is all very new to me, Kinzie. She traced a name in the dirt with her foot. Fine, what else is there to do anyways. They climbed back up to the geodes, and Chris quickly stuffed them in his pockets. How about some lunch - or is it breakfast time now? As Kinzie bit into a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich, she attempted to ignore Chris' frenzied conjectures, concentrating on swallowing boiling coffee. What are you talking about? There was no one in the diner this early, and Kinzie was beginning to feel very aware of the waitress' concerned stare. You sound crazy, you know. Chris was digging through his jacket. The geodes had a peculiar glow, as though they were emanating milky sunlight rather than reflecting it. For the first time, Kinzie felt strangely cautious. The geodes her grandmother collected from Gautemaulan caverns were almost emitting a frequency as Chris enveloped them in string. Fear took hold as Chris pulled Kinzie close and pushed their hands into the circle. This time, the change occurred with clarity. Everything stopped and shifted in a split second. Kinzie was weightless and felt the blood stop within her. Then she was sitting in the same booth again, her blood instantly flowing through her veins as though it had never frozen. The waitress appeared stuck, as though on the verge of taking a step. Then the quiet broke as the coffee pot slipped from her hand, fell to the floor and shattered. You two - you weren't there just now, and now - Kinzie's face flushed as the waitress fumbled towards them. But Chris was already pulling her out of the diner, back to the dock.

4

They're just kids. They're lying, that's all. Chris had forgotten to take into account the most significant aspect of Ocoee, Florida. Nothing traveled more quickly than stories.

Everyone knew about Chris Adams' latest rooftop experiments. Overnight, his crystalrocks and magic string had become a sensation. Performances were demanded, conspiracy theorists took root permanently on his lawn. Christ, the whole town's after me. Chris slumped in his green easy chair and used his toe to move the blinds slightly. He could hear the swell of voices as light burst in, and quickly pulled his foot back. We could just show them. Kinzie was tired. Chris had been pacing in circles for days now, and she wasn't even sure she believed in any of it. No, it could be dangerous; we don't know enough yet. And now the whole town's got me pegged as the Messiah or the Anti-christ, and they don't care either way.

Look, I don't know about you, but I can't take this stuffy room or your grandma's couch anymore. The words leapt out of Kinzie as she pushed her way past the hurt look on Chris' face and into the front yard, walking quickly to avoid the outstretched arms of believers. Chris inhaled sharply and followed. The underside of the dock left a thin layer of slime on her hands as Kinzie grasped for the hidden bottle Chris always left fixed between the planks. Whiskey had a way of making her think clearly, and with the first swallow came an idea. The bottle sat next to her untouched as Kinzie waited for the dock steps behind her to creak. Then, in what seemed like minutes, Chris was leaned up against the steps, the bottle long empty between his boots. Kinzie waited, watched his head tilt back slowly, then crept closer as his eyelids pressed together and his adam's apple rose to the same height as his chin.

The geodes were humming softly as the sun dipped down to touch the swamp. Kinzie moved quickly, knowing full well that Chris could be steps behind her. The string was slack in her hands, but shimmered as it unwound. It was strange, just when Kinzie thought the spool was at its end,

it seemed to stretch and grow until she had encircled the entire town. Where have I seen this string before? Kinzie knew there was something familiar and strange about the twine. It smelled like the swamp. It slid through her fingers, and she realized it was the same feeling in her hands as rising to the surface from the bottom of the lake, seaweed grasping at her feet and fingertips. She inspected the string more thoroughly and realized it was wound seaweed. This is ridiculous. I am trying to make a whole town disappear into time with rocks and swampweed. A burst of air escaped Kinzie's lips as she sat, defeated, at the edge of the field. None of it is real. But the geodes were in place, except for the last, which was burning its shape into the hollow of her palm. As she sunk lower into the grass, it parted in front of her. Chris was panting with anger. He glared down at her, mouth open, sweat beading off his forehead. I'm sorry. Hands dropping to his sides, Chris slumped next to Kinzie, and took the final geode from her hand. But now his curiosity took hold. Black eyes pierced below caterpillar brows, and he held the geode up to the moonlight, his face reflecting on its smooth surface. We ought to try it, you know. We eventually would anyways. Chris placed the geode behind them and looped the seaweed string around it, enclosing the entire town and them in it.

5

We will never know how much we're missing out on. There are no births, no weddings, no funerals. Chris realized too late that the calendar in the Ready Market never changes, but that was only due to the fact that the calendar itself was sixteen years expired in the first place. Chris waits on the dock, the pattern of Kinzie's footfalls keep time. The same restlessness pushes her to her knees every morning. At first, it could be mistaken for prayer. Every morning the search persists among old letters and dust. If

only we had never fought. The thought is buried under the bed, as Kinzie straightens and violently pushes the wrinkles out of her dress. But memories have a way of pricking, echoes press up against Kinzie's ankles – snarling and purring all at once. As she backs away, it bites.

None of this is real, none of it.

The argument has been the same since that night. Chris' plaid shirt was sweat-stained, his unfaltering belief crusting around the armpits and under the collar. He was on the verge of pushing Kinzie clean off the dock. He could never tell whose side it was on, anyhow. Chris watched her storm off. The geodes are still in her knapsack, goddammit.

You can't just follow a person home, especially not in this town. You know old Mrs Rose across the way watches with her binoculars and –

Chris went straight for the knapsack. Oh fuck off. Kinzie felt that rage boil up in the place she supposed her stomach probably was, and flung the canvas sack at the wall. Chris fell to his knees, scrambling in the filth. Both sets of eyes pulled at the last geode, which was rolling dangerously close to a gap between the floorboards under the bed. Its path parting the dust like the red sea on late night religious programs before Easter, Chris suddenly resembling Charlton Heston as he lunged forward. With a thick clunk, Kinzie's resolve broke. For the first time, she asked,

“What if we're actually stuck?”

6

For the first few years, Chris and Kinzie worried and worked, constantly afraid people would start to wonder. After the initial story became legend, it was quickly forgot-

ten. Chris Adams quietly pressed back into harmless eccentricity. Kinzie also sewn hastily, if somewhat haphazardly, back into lower middle class obscurity; only causing 34 minutes of half-assed gossip after unexpectedly quitting her job at Mernie's Used Book Emporium. But there was a nagging at the backs of Kinzie's heels as she felt every step move through solid, collapsing time. It was as real as the humidity. It's not right, someday soon someone's going to wake up and think, 'Why are my shoes always in the same place no matter where I fell asleep last night?' The dock listened intently, offering no advice only comfort. It hid flasks for Kinzie in places Chris wouldn't think to look, and waited with Chris for her daily visits.

They searched and searched for that runaway geode, tearing into the walls below Kinzie's room, but only gained pneumatic coughs from the horse hair insulation. Chris had never stepped foot out of Ocoee. At least I can't miss what I never had. Kinzie continued the hunt alone, the incessant of humming of the last geode kept her awake at night.

Chris watched Kinzie pace back and forth as the days turned in on themselves. When he was seven years old he fell off a radio flyer red wagon and broke two fingers. He didn't cry then, but he cried now. The dock soaked up those howls, and whispered in Chris' ear. To stop the whining geode, the experiment had to end. It's hard to trust that old dock, Chris pulled on his beard. Hard to tell whose side its on. For all he knew, that dock just wanted to keep Kinzie to itself forever. But there wasn't any choice, not really. The dock groaned under his bare feet as he watched the geodes sink. The mud made a terrible sucking noise and then they were gone.

Sunland

Projectile Points

Mustard Yellow

Bethesda

Sunland

The window was open this morning, swamp air filled the living room. I woke up and the couch reeked of mildew and last night's cigars. My friends, passed out on the floor, appear as flipbook ghosts jerkily moving back and forth as I open and close one eye at a time. First one eye, then the other. No one wakes up from my mental prodding, so I make coffee and smoke a cigarette. Church bells are ringing in the distance, but then I realize there are no real church towers left here. What I'm hearing is the new speaker system the First Baptist Church downtown bought. This techno call to worship sounds flat, but it manages to stir up a longing within me I thought died years ago, or was possibly never born. I imagine putting on a dress. I imagine walking up the steps, the pastor knows my name and greets me with a practiced nod. My hair is long, curled at the ends. My high heels click gracefully as I find my pew. I know all the songs. My teeth are white in light pink never-swollen gums. The hot water whistled and pulled me back to the moldy carpets and still-drunk friends. "We will find something to believe in," I thought solemnly as I bit into buttered toast.

Do you know how hard it is to research abandoned buildings? Nighttime explorers are more committed to recording hauntings, glowing orbs, supernatural sightings than street names.

Sunland Boy Scout Troup (1967)

Cribs in Sleeping area (1967)

Nice Bright Orbs at one of the main entrances

Red energy at the top right along with some Orbs and what appears to be Ecto

Nice multi-colored orbs!

Huge Orb to the left surrounded by smaller yellow Orbs

I went looking for Sunland Hospital for the first time in August, 2003. I sat on the floor of the van, picking out twigs and weed stems from the carpet and placing them in separate piles while the band tried to scare each other. We'd only heard stories about the abandoned mental hospital, how dead children played in the hallways. It was a site of negligence, an unsightly blemish on Florida's not-so-pristine history. Chris was pouring over a hand-drawn map of the place. That was how this whole thing started. Some kid gave it to him at the end of their set, I'm not sure why.

The drummer, Kosch, loved those ghost hunter shows you see on tv. Couldn't get enough of them. He would always make us watch them late at night, I was the only one who ever was really scared by it. I couldn't stand to watch another episode, but there was only one way out of it I could think of.

The Ocoee Paranormal Ass-Kicking League (O.P.A.L.) was formed. We started small: cemeteries, schoolyards, abandoned shacks in the swampland. But soon we heard about the chain of abandoned children's mental institutions known as Sunland Hospitals. It was only a matter of finding the Orlando location. I was the cameraman, since I had a camera.

"Orbs are for amateurs, we got to scare out some real ghost shit, you know?"

Built in 1952, Sunland Hospital in Orlando, Florida, was originally W.T. Edwards Tuberculosis Hospital. It was never a treatment center, at the time tuberculosis was without cure. It was a waiting facility, the end of the line. An entire side of the main building was windows, as it was a

commonly held belief that sunshine and fresh air were agents of healing for the t.b. patients.

“Once lodged on a given ward, the patient is firmly instructed that the restrictions and deprivations he encounters are not due to such blind forces as tradition or economy – and hence dissociable from self – but are intentional parts of his treatment, part of his need at the time, and therefore an expression of the state that his self has fallen to.”

Dust pushed up out of the dirt as our van slid to a stop a block away from the Fence. We followed the map’s instructions, and were as discreet as drunk kids can be. I looked at the pale, greenish faces floating around me. Not ghosts, just my friends, scared shitless. I took a breath.

“Let’s fucking do this already,”

This wasn’t like the tv hunters, and I was ready. We made our way quickly to the hole in the fence, guided by that map, the anonymous voice of a scrawny hardcore kid. The hole was small. Chris and I made our way through easily. Kosch, Adam, and Dylan took more squeezing, but we were in. I brushed my jeans off and looked. A large field sprawled before us, the building rising up out of the middle of the earth perversely. It looked like a person caught in the middle of exhaling, its collapsing middle parts soaked in years of rain and neglect.

Theories for the Sudden Abandonment:

1. Asbestos
2. Fire Hazards
3. Neglect and Abuse

We walked the perimeter of the hospital, I snapped photos without looking. Teenagers and explorers had ripped open windows and smashed doors, beams and concrete chunks

fell together to form haphazard cathedral arches. Letting my eyes adjust in the main lobby, my flashlight scanned over the wreckage. Overturned wheelchairs closed in around us and graffitied hallways grasped at the light. These halls hadn't seen electricity since 1983, and were thirsty for the grand fluorescence of their past. We stood unsure, felt watched, as Chris nervously opened the map. The basement.

Two of the following:

1. Delusions
2. Prominent hallucinations (through-out the day for several days or several times a week for several weeks, each hallucinatory experience not being limited to a few brief moments)
3. Incoherence or marked loosening of associations
4. Catatonic behavior
5. Flat or grossly inappropriate affect
6. bizarre delusions (i.e., involving a phenomenon that the person's culture would regard as totally implausible, e.g., thought broadcasting, being controlled by a dead person)

Originally, the basement was a deglorified burial chamber for those t.b. patients. 5 round chambers line one wall. To the right, large piles of firewood, crumbling and mold-furry. "The crematorium of the damned" is scrawled in red paint in one of the furnaces, written by someone more brave than us. It all feels too fresh, and the stories I read on the internet about missing disabled children and this place pull at the tingly place where my neck meets my back. According to official records, the crematorium has not existed since 1962 during renovation.

Tap tap tap tap tap

We all freak out, I point my camera towards the corner of the room as Chris prepares to bolt. I take a picture, the flash illuminates a malnourished rat. My first ghost.

1997: Keith Murdock fell three stories down the elevator shaft and his skull cracked open like an orange. We were warned of this incident by the map, with what appeared to be blood spatters drawn hastily around it.

We climbed to the third floor, the door was locked. This is where the map ended, with a skull and cross-bones drawing. Chris sized up the door before pulling the rusted pins out. The record room. We read that the medical records were intact, that blood samples and pills scattered the floor. But none of us had believed it, and then there we were. An index taped to the inside of photo album devoid of pictures:

Beauticians at W.T. Edwards Tuberculosis Hospital

Birthday party at Sunland 1964

Hospital Pet therapy at Sunland Center Hospital

Disabled child in the swimming pool of the Sunland Hospital

Sunland patients out for some air

Ward at Sunland Hospital

Activity room at Sunland Hospital

Residents brushing their teeth at Sunland Hospital

Boy Scout patients of Sunland Hospital

The excavation continued for hours, these obscure histories scoured for abnormality or signs of a hidden agenda. Like holy men studying ancient texts, we read the case files. I bent down and picked up a once-orange bottle, full of sand. It was time to leave. I took more pictures, the sun was coming up.

At all four corners of the main fence, you should look out for security guards. It is a Federal crime to trespass on this site, so don't get caught.

In the early morning, we sat in the van, getting high to balance out our now senseless paranoia. Everyone swears to encountering a ghost, I flip absently through the photos and Kosch points excitedly at asbestos orbs. Those same faces, once full of terror, are now elated. We have touched the void, maybe. I drink a beer, and the sun rises over our sleeping bodies.

1. ingestion
2. absorption into the blood
3. transport to the brain via circulation
4. penetration into brain tissue through the membranes that protect it from many chemicals that might disturb it (i.e. the brain-blood barrier)
5. association with the proteins whose function they control

Arrival of the first eighteen children. It does not matter if they left or not. The thin high building is haunted by the living, by inebriated teenagers in search of the mystical.

Projectile Points

There appeared to be a shovel in my hand and I knelt close to the earth in relation to my body. Pieces of clay seem to pile up around me. Perhaps this field of buried teeth never existed before. Perhaps I never existed and my knees only hover above the topsoil. I learned that nothing ever really touches, that we are made of dancing electricity. I spend hours of my day imagining microscopic isolations; particles whirring in close proximity to each other, flirting. The clay seems to entrench me, my search has become a militant excavation. It's hard to think of these ancient weapons as connected to me. I can't even make toast without burning it. An artist from England crossed the channel and fled to Eastern Europe to live independent of society. The sun burns his nose as he plants rows of carrots. Perhaps this could be considered performance art or a revolutionary act. He sharpens homemade knives; he skins animals he raised from birth. As I dig in this field somewhere near Savannah, blisters pearl up on the soft parts of my skin. My shovel parts the ground, little pieces of old wars and homesteads getting lodged in my shins. The English artist went to a seminar in July on survival tactics. There were stale donuts and workshops taught by Renaissance fair enthusiasts and middle-aged biology teachers. As he entered the class entitled, Projectile Points: Make Your Own Spears, the English artist felt a stirring within. For hours he whittled away at bones and small pieces of flint. In his gas-heated apartment, he sat on the floor and carved out arrowheads from any material suitable. For two hundred and thirty-seven days, the artist ate peanut butter from the jar and created projectile points. The floor became a sea of arrowheads, speckled burgundy where the ratty carpet persevered. On television, a voice told him that it was possible to live a life free of worry. Images of oceans and laughing gypsies

poured into the living room. The arrowheads were packed tightly into twelve cardboard boxes and sent to an aunt in America. The artist was packed tightly into a train and served liquor and cigarettes. In the passenger car, he decided to never create art again and devote his efforts to complete self-reliance. Aunt Esther returned from town to find twelve boxes on her front porch from a nephew that she had never met. Tossing aside crumpled newspaper filler, Esther emptied the contents of each box. As the piles of crudely carved arrowheads grew, an inexplicable anger welled up inside her. With each shovelful of dirt, this rage was pushed into the earth. By midnight, Esther had buried the last stone. The carved flints drop with a satisfying clunk into the metal pail at my side. I will search all day, collecting these fragments. Fueled by each discovery, the landscape unrolls as backdrop to imagined bison hunts or military coup d'etats. Pails give way to buckets, and news of my excavation reaches a local naturalist. The earth rotates slowly away from daylight and my fingers are too sore to write the final count for museums and historians. I have found the most concentrated amount of projectile points on record, and for years my name will be found in rather obscure books and articles. The arrowheads are packed away in twelve boxes and filed into a basement storage facility at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum. All except one, which sits on my dresser. Sometimes, when the wind has been harrassing the trees outside my window for days, I push the arrowhead close to my ear. But instead of war cries, all that reverberates against my hollow skull is the sound of gypsy wagon wheels.

Mustard Yellow

My mother had a necklace with a glass oval pendant. Inside were three unimpressive beige specks that blended in with her chest. Mustard seeds, a reminder that faith, even small, was powerful. I don't know where she got the charm, but it resided constantly in the hollow of her neck. In the bath, I would shriek and pour water into her concave parts. She would let me, the pendant buoyant, floating in the miniature lake. Unaware of its religious significance, I only knew it belonged to my mother, and was therefore exquisite.

Fluorescent gold flower heads, indistinguishable from each other. A lake of this new yellow, only visible when I scoot up to the window, my nose bumping against the faux leather insides of the backseat. Our sky blue Ford Taurus on its yearly pilgrimage to Los Angeles. My mother pushes the pendant to the window, a prismatic rainbow brushes the circles from under her eyes, but only briefly. In hushed tones she explains that the seeds are the flowers just outside in. For the first time, I love a color fully.

When Moses led the Jews to Canaan, it took 80 years. He fucked up once, hit a rock or something, and his god put him to rest atop a barren mountain overlooking all that milk and honey. I colored while the Sunday School teacher told us that story – we being a bunch of snotty pinkeyed monkeys in our best linens. I kept lifting up my dress to itch my stockings until I was sent to the corner.

My father led us to the South, land of cornbread and whole milk. I was in sixth grade, socially awkward with buck teeth, frizzy hair, chicken legs. I sat alone at lunch, paranoia quickly set in. Then one morning came some sort of salvation. Halfway through the class the door opened

softly and a rush of black hair and body odor slid into the chair next to mine. The teacher, a middle-aged woman beset with the moral stringency of the previous century and corns on her feet, accosted this new and strange creature, “Well I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure.” The girl looked at me, her eyes full of the same foreign confusion as mine used to be. She’s not from around here. I quietly said, “She means, who are you?”

In detention later, which was spent writing chapters of the Bible, I glanced at Reagan, who was chewing her nails, the borrowed Bible lay unopened at her feet. “It’s not like they’re going to fucking grade it.” She could sense my anxiousness before I had a chance to open my mouth, my lips pursed together nervously at the curse.

We ate lunch together every day after that. I ate my grilled cheese and tomato sandwich, while Reagan sucked noisily on a mustard packet. The paranoia had gotten to her too. Though she’d never admit it, I knew she was afraid of chewing too loud. The rest of our female classmates resembled pictures I’d seen in tabloids of Jon Benet-Ramsey, 12 year olds with pageant hair and shining teeth. It really was a wonder that only one faculty member was charged with child molestation at that small Southern Baptist school. But we weren’t to talk about that.

For some reason, the pastor of the church that ran our school bought up the adjoining plot of land to the campus. Turned out the ground was radioactive, and was left to its own devices (a rarity among that congregation). The hired security, an older gentleman named Samuel Clemens Crofoot, routinely chased Reagan and I into the lot. He always stopped short of the toxic warning sign and spit dejectedly over the fence. “Well shit, if you girls want to go and get mutated, that ain’t my affair.”

I always ran behind Reagan. She made her way through the cypress forest easily, while every root snatched my feet out from under me. We tripped and ran and pushed through the drip-painting vines until we reached the Factory. Reagan called it that intuitively, but I had to brush the caked mud from the sign in front of the crumbling brick building. “Do you always need a history?” No one had bothered to demolish the abandoned RC Cola Factory when the surrounding earth was deemed poisonous. Sneaker footprints marked the stairs. We laid on the roof, the Spanish moss-filtered sunshine scrubbing our faces clean.

At first, the Factory was a desperate escape to be attempted only when all other hiding places were unavailable to us (Sam Clemens was, if nothing else, persistent in the fight against truancy). But time spread out endless and slippery before Reagan and I, it was enough to make a person reckless. The Factory became our fortress, half-sinking back into the miry earth. It was Reagan's idea to decorate; our life of crime began. It started small, brass faculty nameplates, ugly turquoise planters from the school counselor's office, the chapel's dusty altar pieces (which were not reported missing). But it was never enough. Within minutes of victory, more elaborate heists were planned. Undisturbed and unchallenged, a five-foot-tall cross of durable plastic rested on top of the Missions building. At one time, perhaps in the early 1960s, it was painted bright white, but had since fallen into disrepair. Its edges took on the same hue as morning piss. The whole crucifix tilted forward slightly, just enough to seem quietly oppressive. The moment Reagan noticed it, my ass went numb in anticipation of the hours which would be spent in detention, scribing first Deuteronomy then maybe Luke or Psalms in its entirety if the teacher was feeling enthusiastic. But of course we took it, I'll never know how we got that peeling plastic paint off our forearms in time for school. We waited all

day, with the stoic faces of martyrs, fully prepared for expulsion or at least excommunication. But no one noticed the absence of one aging yellowed cross, it might as well never have existed. So it kept watch over our Factory and became, perhaps for the first time, a beacon of hope.

Bethesda

There was a stirring inside me as the sprinklers pushed up out of the ground in front of my feet. I waited on the edge of the fairway every day for the same feeling. Just knowing all this water flows under me in little organized pipes is enough for now. I promised my best friend I would go with her to the haunted trailer parks outside Savannah, I haven't even packed yet.

a toothbrush – I never bring toothpaste – that little dependency on the rest of the world is comforting. No one would deny a person toothpaste.

extra socks, I know we will walk through marshes at night, terrified of snakes and gators.

paper and pencils

salmon eggs for fishing (we didn't catch anything)

extra underwear

pot, so we can sneak into her family's graveyard and "smoke among ancestors."

a case to hide the pot in, from her great-aunt who we suspect has very little tolerance for such activities.

blue jeans

a shirt that is pink like moldy bread edges and tie-dyed with sweat stains.

The Exorcist (our favorite movie)

a bar of soap

During the drive, Reagan and I took turns arguing and switching radio stations, only stopping long enough to take a roadside piss, trails of yellowed inside-us juice curving around asphalt pebbles and into thirsty grass. Zipping up my pants, I stared down at the pooling liquid. A soft lapping caught my ears. A small grey cat was crouched, pink rough tongue darting in and out between delicate fangs, ur-

ine splashing up onto its whiskers and beading off its chin. Even its eyes were piss-colored. Reagan immediately fell in love, I could tell as she scooped up the thing, it mewling forlornly as she wrapped her brown jacket around it – a gift from her ex-boyfriend. The cat stank up the car the rest of the way, but she didn't mind. We settled on a name, Lavender, although I voted for Stinko Pisscat.

It says on the bottle we have to wait 45 minutes.” My scalp was pinching, my eyes red and watery. All I could imagine was chunks of hair resting solidly in my hands, my bald head looking like pictures I'd seen of Martian landscape. Burnt red and cratered, reeking of ammonia. I pushed my head under the faucet and squeezed my face tight as ruddy streams trickled over my ears and off the tip of my nose. Reagan was howling, her stoned laughter echoing off tiled walls and joining the dye river down the drain. It didn't turn out right, matted and spotty. “But these things never do.” Reagan's great-aunt sympathized, hiding a half-smile behind her teacup and consoling us with lemon cake. My hair was pulled tight into twin braids for the next seven months.

Light from The Exorcist danced excitedly across Reagan's glasses as we gathered candles and pushed Lavender into my knapsack. The house was quiet as we slowly closed the front door – turning the knob with practiced accuracy. Then, we were let loose. Free to wander the trailer park, and the marsh beyond. Reagan led as the cat purred against my hip. Following a path centuries old, Reagan bent down to examine her mother's grave (she had fallen to her death from an airboat twelve years prior). We set up candles in a circle around us, as we'd seen on the TV – a foolproof way of summoning the dead. So this was the real reason for the pilgrimage, I thought as Stinko Pisscat dug its claws into my thigh. We tried to make contact all night, thin whispers

became pleading wails. But the dead stayed dead, and leaves crunched under our shoulders. We were dead too for a moment, but the sun swept back the hair from our faces. A new recklessness formed in Reagan, only visible in the place where her upper lip protruded below her nostrils. Lavender ran away during the night, it was never discussed again.

Branches snatched ravenously at our stolen golf cart as we careened through the forest at the edge of the fairway. Plenty of times Reagan and I had raced, turning sharp corners to avoid the pines. But it was different today. My body knew what was coming, my eyes shut tightly as Reagan viciously yanked the wheel. We sat suspended, completely silent, as the trees turned over and over around us. The embankment slid past us as blood ran out of my mouth and added freckles to Reagan's cheek. I pushed her shoulder back into place, as she stared past me into the tree-tops.