Title
Beside You in Time: Short Stories

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Publication Date
2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Beside You in Time: Short Stories

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Jennifer Lorene Sun

August 2014

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Prof. Sarah Shun-lien Bynum
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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
I must first thank my committee members. Thank you Susan Straight for your insightful comments on craft and pushing me to be a better writer. Much appreciation to Tom Lutz for letting me have the freedom to write whatever I want. I send an enormous amount of gratitude to Sarah Shun-lien Bynum for always believing in this project. To Michael Jayme, thank you for guiding me back to writing from emotion.

My thanks also to Robert Eversz, Christine Schutt, Kevin Brockmeier and Luis Urrea. My appreciation also goes to my workshop members at Sewanee, Napa Valley, Tin House, USC, UCLA Extension, UCSD and UCR. All of your feedback has helped shaped this project into what it is today.

Thank you to Aimee Bender who taught me how to write with compassion.
For Seymour’s Fat Lady.
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Ignacio, Iggy, mi primo… I’m going to talk out my grief on this spoken word tape. When this side fills up, I want you to not listen, but instead fill the other side with your feelings. Then, when the tape is full, we can lie on the floor of my room and listen to the whole thing together and figure out what’s next. Besos. Angela.

My mom’s death comes in pieces. The memories are all out of order, as if someone took them, and shook them around in my head. The starting memory is always different, but the last memory is always the same, with her being in a box. Right now, I’m thinking about her hair, thick, wavy, and soft brown, and how it turned red in the light. Today the starting memory is when she painted my toenails black and orange for Halloween. I felt silly with them. I asked her to paint her toenails too. She shook me lightly by the shoulders and said, “I’m not a niñita like you.” But then I gave her my sad-girl face. She sighed. We wore sandals together to the grocery store and waited for people to notice our feet. I was ten when we did this. She died last year. I’m fourteen now.

She’d say her throat tickled. The cough wasn’t deep, a hack sound. She’d grab a Ricola and suck on it. She kept a bag of them in her purse. I got tired of seeing her reach for those medicine candies. I told her to go to the doctor. “I have no insurance, mijita,” she said. I told her to go to the free clinic. Her eyes looked foggy, like an old dog.

Our grandparents came with us to the first doctor visit. My mom was inside a little room while the doctor said a bunch Spanish to us. I didn’t catch all of what he said. Maybe I tried too hard not to listen. Abuelita, put her hand to her chest while Abuelo
squeezed her upper arm. “Mi dios, mi dios,” she said. I got worried. Then the doctor went back to the room and our grandparents sat down with wet faces. I heard a nurse behind the counter say to the other nurse, without whispering, she couldn’t believe my mom tried to hide it for so long, and the other one said, “She’s probably going soon.” They didn’t think I knew any English.

I went to this liquor store a lot then. They sold Mexican candy and I’d always get Lucas, the chili powder in a plastic saltshaker. Shake the powder into your hand and then lick it. I bought some for you, Iggy. Around the time you and your parents moved back to Pedro from Vegas. When we all realized that my mom was sick. You said you didn’t like hot things. So, I bought limón flavored. You held out your hand, like a scared dove. You’re half white and look it. I shook the candy into your palm, and you stared at me, and at this stuff in your hand, and I knew you thought it was salt, but I said, “It’s okay.” I pushed your hand up to your face and watched your tongue dip into the pile of white powder. “It’s good,” you said and smacked your lips.

My mamá wanted to keep her hair. I found her in the bathroom in her pink robe. It always looked so soft, like she was wrapped up in cotton candy. She sat on the tiled floor. Green vomit stained her robe. Her scalp showed underneath the thin hairs sticking out of her head like wires. She moved her hands slow over the tile like she was looking for the rest of her hair.

One night I stayed on your side of the duplex. We crawled into your bed and underneath the covers. We rubbed our cold hands and tightened our hoodie strings around our faces. I couldn’t open my eyes and look at you. And it hurt so bad, like a burn in my
chest and I couldn’t cry it out because I didn’t want to wake mis tíos. I told you my mom was gonna die and I didn’t know why this was gonna happen and there was nothing anyone could do about it. You said you didn’t know why my mother had to die. I asked what could we do with all of this? “I don’t know,” you said. “Nothing.” I let you hold me, my face in your skinny chest. Our hot breaths under the blanket. You ran your hands through my hair and shushed me to sleep like I was your baby instead of your cousin.

One time my mamá laid in the recliner and I sat at her icy feet. Her skin, used to be smooth and soft brown, turned grey and loose. Her eyes rolled up and her teeth chattered. Her hair and her eyebrows fell away after the chemo. She was just a round head popping up from her robe. And your dad, Uncle Dino, held her hand. On his knees he asked God to help her. Said his prayer over and over to where it didn’t sound like Italian or even English, but another language only he and God understood. His forehead was all tight and tía Paulina, your mom, lit all these candles with pictures of Mary and Jesus and Saints on them. I asked her, “What the hell are they good for? These candles. Don’t do nothing but make the room hot.” I asked what you thought, but you sat on the couch and stared at my mother like she was already a ghost.

After school, I took the bus to the hospital. I sat in a chair in the room with my mom. I did my homework while these ladies, sometimes men, came in and fixed her wires, and the bag of water they put in her, and the bag of liquid for the pain. My mother didn’t talk much and I didn’t talk much. When she could talk, she said “Mija” and I said “Mamá.” And she’d roll back. Her fingernails and toenails fell off at that point. I rubbed the raw area, where the nail used to be, real light, when she slept.
The whites of my mother’s eyes turned yellow like a banana’s skin. She’d shake, and finally I couldn’t take it anymore. I asked the doctor why she shook and why her eyes yellowed. He took off his glasses and sat down. He looked at the floor and said her pain was so big the painkiller had to be bigger and so it plugged up her liver, which made her eyes yellow. I asked, “What about the shaking? Could you make her stop doing that?” And he looked at me and told me the morphine wasn’t touching her anymore.

My mother’s stomach swelled like she was pregnant. But I knew it was all the sickness inside of her. Our Abuelos were downstairs in the cafeteria. I never felt like eating anything then but candy. I told her I loved her but I don’t think she heard. Everything she said then was in Spanish. And she giggled a lot instead of talked. I got scared because she didn’t even seem like my mamá anymore, she seemed like a demon with her yellow eyes. And for the first time I told God. I closed my eyes tight and I told him he did this to her and now it’s enough. He needs to take her because her gums are red with blood now. And I opened my eyes. I saw the sickness in my mother’s stomach move. It went up the side of her chest, and then to her throat, like a frog, and I was scared she was going to choke but I stayed in my seat. Then her mouth opened and out of it came this large ball of moving lights. So many lights, like tiny rainbows. And it went through the window like it wasn’t ever there. Maybe it was just my dream. Can people dream while still awake?

The church was filled with flowers. White, yellow, and red ones: all marigolds. A picture of her when she wasn’t sick stood on an easel. Her coffin was closed. No one wanted to see her all shriveled up and bald like a monkey. I couldn’t listen to the priest. I
kept staring at her blown-up picture and her coffin. *She was really in there,* I thought. The thing about pictures of dead people is even if you didn’t know they died, you could look at their picture and think, *that person is dead.* Or at least I can always tell. But the priest, remember Iggy? He made us repeat these words about Jesus and Mary and mothers and sons, and I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about, but he kept singing it like a song, and I swear each prayer lasted like twenty minutes. The whole thing took forever. At one point, he had us stand and sit back down a couple times. Now I know why my mom never went to church. All I remember about the funeral: the picture, the closed coffin holding her body, and the priest at the podium singing.

After we drove to the cemetery and they brought the coffin to the plot and they lowered her into the ground I thought, *It’s over.* I told our family that I didn’t want a funeral party. I didn’t want to watch the adults with their paper plates piled with lasagna and lemon cake. So this was it. Her friends stood together and a few of her old boyfriends I didn’t really know, though none of them visited her during the hospital days. We all looked down on the box. I was never going to see her again. Never feel her curls on my cheek when she hugged me, or smell her musky perfume. Never hear her sing while she got ready for work. Never listen to her cry about her novios. So much never.
Abuelita stands with her back turned to me and her hands in the sink up to her elbows in soapy water. She stares out the window at the wall of jasmine blooming on the trellis and I wonder what she’s thinking but don’t ask. In these moments, she’s in a trance, staring at the jasmine but not really seeing it. As she inhales the perfume from the flowers, her mind goes somewhere else, somewhere private and hers. Then she shakes her head and scrubs the grill pan like she never even stopped.

In Abuelita’s bedroom, in the nightstand drawer, is a wooden box with La Santa Biblia in gold lettering. Once, I lifted the rusty latch and inside saw the portrait of Jesus, one hand raised, one hand tapped his chest, a thin golden halo surrounded his head. His face looked feminine and soft, and his beard trimmed into two peaks reminded me of something more devil-like than holy. A ring of thorns squeezed his exposed heart. Seeing the drops of blood, I couldn’t help but flinch and bring my own hand to my chest. I flipped the thin see-through pages of the bible, fanning a smell of its own like money. I pinched out a piece of the page from the bible with the word sangre printed on it and placed it on my tongue. Bitter. I don’t know why I thought it would taste like cotton candy. Jesus’ eyes squinted at me and I snapped the book shut.

My mamá used to have this picture of my dad in her wallet. It was the only picture I ever saw of him. He had thick dark hair, tanned skin, a small nose, and dark eyes. He wore a blue flannel shirt, jeans worn white at the knees, and scuffed boots. I had his hair. He looked nothing like me. My mother used to call him pendejo. I’d ask her why
she kept his picture then. She’d put it away quick and say, looking down, “For you.” I ripped it up the day she died.

Every morning Abuelo’s voice echoes in the house when he leaves to go work at the docks. The smell of his coffee flows into my room under the crack of the door. Abuelita warms up his pan dulce, but every morning he tells her to save energy. My stomach grumbles before the hum of the microwave starts and fills the house with sugar. The walls of our duplex are so thin, Iggy. I wonder if you could smell it too?

Abuelita’s room used to be my mother’s room. The dresser mirror had a peacock feather jammed in its frame. Now prayer cards are shoved in the corner where the feather went. Doilies sprawl the dresser’s surface with one small jewelry box in the center. I open it sometimes. The wood smells like mothballs. Inside are two of my Abuelita’s small hoop earrings, a pearl drop necklace, an opal ring, and my mother’s turquoise bracelet. I put on the bracelet once. It hung on my wrist, heavy. It should be mine, in my room, in my jewelry box if I had one, because she was my mother. But I don’t know what it feels like to have a daughter; I hear it’s even stronger in that way. I opened the top dresser drawer to find large silk panties, nylon stockings to the knees, Abuelita’s underthings. Amongst them I found a photo in black and white and recognized Abuelita because the small mole above her right eyebrow is there. The 40s and 50s, those unfair decades, but everyone looked like movie stars. I liked the way Abuelita’s hair curled tight and how her teeth peeked behind her dark lips. She looked at the camera, over her bare shoulder, all flirty. The blurred outline of her body reminded me of the fuzziness in dreams.
I sat in a chair in my bedroom and stared at the crack in the corner of the wall while Abuelita gave me a French braid. The crack stretched up near the ceiling from the earthquake last year. It happened in the middle of the night and felt like our duplex was a new toy in a baby’s hands. I got up and yelled for my mother, reaching in front of me in the dark. I felt clothes. Lost in the closet. Freaking out, I told myself I was going to die in the closet, suffocate by sweaters. Then my mother’s cold hand wrapped around my forearm and pulled me into the doorway. She held on to me tight while the earth moved under our feet. Though she held her breath, her heart beat fast against my cheek. I looked up at her face, focused on the mole above her eyebrow, Abuelita, not my mother.

Abuelo comes home, he smells like a wet sock and his hair is plastered to his head from his yellow hard hat. He barely says hello as he puts his empty coffee canister in the sink and then jumps straight into the shower. He meets us when the food is placed on the table, wears a fresh white t-shirt, sweat pants, hair slicked back from being shampooed. If he wasn’t so stinky from work, I’d call him a baby for showering at night. His face is freshly scrubbed, but his droopy eyes and pink cheeks show how tired he is.

Abuelita tells me I look plain; my clothes like a boy’s. I wear too many t-shirts and jeans. I told her just because our family has changed doesn’t mean I have to wear dresses all the time. I had one ugly dress, lime green with white polka dots. I wore it to my mother’s funeral. I refused to wear black. My Abuelita ironed it and when she was done, I pictured her wedged shoes sinking into the carpet as she approached my door, hanging the dress on the doorknob to my room, sighing before she turned away. Sometimes she hangs the dress on my door on Sundays, hoping I’ll attend mass.
Abuelita never wears pants, but colored sun dresses in bright greens, fuchsias and turquoise. Her gold-hooped earrings dangle from her thick earlobes. When she takes them out at night, and we sit on the couch and watch TV, she lets me rub the pierced area with my thumb and forefinger.

Abuelita waters plants. She stands on the balls of her feet to stretch herself taller to get at the tomatoes hung over our porch. Her heels are chapped and rough, her yellow slippers covered in dirt. I worry when she gets shaky, like I won’t be able to catch her.

The other day I noticed a hornet’s nest in the corner of the window near our front porch. It looked like a honeycomb. I stared at the slick wings of the hornet, its jittery body crawling up, in, and around its nest. I sat inside the house, safe, while Abuelita took the stick end of a broom, held her breath, counted to three, and whacked the nest. It crumbled like graham crackers.

Remember when Abuelita got a fever? We told her to rest and for once she listened. Her eyes looked swollen in her sleep. I made Top Ramen for dinner and me and Abuelo ate in silence, slurping noodles, neither of us getting full. “Cooking isn’t so bad,” I said. When we finished our meal, Abuelo took the plates away and filled them with hot water and soap and scrubbed them with a sponge, turning them upside down on the rack to dry. The next morning, I made us cereal in the same bowls we ate the ramen. As soon as I poured the milk in the bowls, rainbow bubbles rose; Abuelo didn’t rinse them well enough. The next day, Tía, your mom, came over wishing aloud for lasagna. “That dish of mourning,” she called it.
I hummed a song while Abuelita slept in the recliner. The same chair my mother used to sleep in. Abuelita’s cheeks sagged, her mouth randomly chewed, her snores stuck in her nose, came out in squeaks, waking her for a moment until she settled back into sleep. I hummed a song to her sweaty forehead, her fading red eyelids, and the soft hairs in her nostrils.

I agreed to go to the cliffs with Abuelo every Sunday. The excuse is we’re both too tired to go to my mother’s grave. Too tired to go to mass. It’s too much to watch everyone else cry over her marker, watch their tears hit the stone, and then dry up from the sun. It’s too much to see Abuelita, mis tíos, and you, Iggy, sit in the pews and soak up all the light from the stained-glass windows of the church. The first Sunday me and Abuelo went to the cliffs, he gripped my hand and spoke in a Spanish that lost me as we walked to the edge of our city. We carried old plastic grocery bags filled with jasmine picked that morning from the trellis. We dropped the star shaped flowers one at a time over the cliffs. We watched them float and fade into the waters below.
Me and you crawled up the attic where Abeulita saved a box of my mother’s clothes. It was dark, dusty, and if we opened our mouths too wide, spider webs got caught on our tongues. I thought of the horror story of a woman who fell asleep and a spider laid its eggs in her cheek. She woke up the next morning to hundreds of tiny baby spiders crawling out of her mouth. Their thin legs tickled her skin. A swarm of black covered her eyes. Since then, I always got scared anytime I saw a spider. Anytime I saw a web. But I’ve learned to throw those fears away. Because if you don’t, they keep showing up, in your dreams, in the mirror, when you go up into attics. They crawl across your face when you sleep, and then there’s no peace. I opened the box of my mother’s clothes and smelled her musky perfume. You said, “It smells like her.” And it took everything in me not to cry. I didn’t want that pain creeping out of me. Smelling her perfume made me believe she was still here hidden in the attic all this time.

I took my mamá’s white blouse, the one with the puffy sleeves, and her long purple skirt, her hippie clothes from when she was a teenager. I made them small, just like my mom taught me, with Abeulita’s sewing machine because my mother was already an adult in her body by then. You sat with me while I sewed. Not really seeing what was coming together. I took her scarves, gold ones, and purple ones with jewel studs left over from the eighties. You didn’t say nothing while I worked on my costume. When I was done, I put it on, and stuck Abeulita’s gold hoops in my ears. I curled my hair and then
spread purple shadow on my eyelids. I looked in the mirror: all wrapped in scarves. You said I looked like a fortuneteller who could tell you the what the stars mean.

I didn’t get your costume at first. I didn’t know who this Morrissey guy was. You showed up on the doorstep to my side of the duplex with your silhouette against the security door. A moth buzzed around the porch light. Your hair reminded me of Elvis but messy. The tips looked wispy like feathers. I opened the door and saw your black glasses, the flowy shirt, and the bouquet of gladiolus flowers hanging from your back jeans pocket like a tail. I blurted out, “What are you supposed to be? A poet-nerd?” Morrissey would not approve. I know better now. Your face drooped so fast, like your hair, like your flowers, like your posture your mother always complains about. “A former ballerina has a slouching son? Ay guey, Iggy,” she’d say. I’m just messing with you.

We walked all the way from Alma to Grand to go to the party. It was dark and people wore costumes. They rang on doorbells, held out their pillowcases, and collected candies. The air misted with ocean water. Our feet crunched brown leaves. We walked with our heads down to look out for the pavement. The sidewalks in Pedro are always broken, from an earthquake, or a tree’s root, never repaired because nobody ever gives a care. You told me all about Morrissey, the Smiths, Depeche Mode, and the Cure, all the music from the last decade. I told you it’s always better to be in the now. I didn’t want to admit that the past hung on my back like a fat monkey. You had your Walkman clipped to your belt and handed me your headphones. “Just listen to one song,” you said. The guitar sounded dreamy, if dreams had their own tone. Morrissey sang about dying in a car accident with the one he loves being the perfect way to die and I couldn’t tell if he was
serious, joking, or maybe both. But his voice filled me. It came out of the headphones, into my ears, and I felt everything inside my chest open. I turned to you with big eyes and an open mouth. You just smiled back and said, “See, I told you it was good.” I listened to mostly Nine Inch Nails since my mother died. I needed something angry to burn through me like fire. But Morrissey, he’s some other way of expressing emotions. Moves inside of me like water.

The party was at Petra’s house, a small adobe that made me think some people actually do live in boxes. The stoner chick with the purple hair who always wears flannels and smokes cigarettes near the bungalows in between classes. Me and you walked inside her house and Hole was playing on the stereo. The growling of Courtney Love and distorted guitars vibrated the walls of the house. Petra was the crying beauty pageant winner on the cover of “Live Through This.” She told us to look at her face. How she actually cried her makeup off to make the costume more real. Black clumps stuck to her lashes and her cheeks streaked with mascara. She wore a pink slip dress and a sash with “Miss World” sewed on. A crooked tiara rested on her head. She asked who you were and you said, “Duh, I’m Morrissey.” I could tell she didn’t really know who he was because her eyes went blank, but then she bobbed her head up and down and said, “Yeah, cool. I love that guy.” I felt really lame about my fortuneteller costume. Like I was a kid or something and not the cool teenager I was supposed to be. I took the scarf off my head and fluffed my hair out when she walked away to go talk to someone else. I didn’t know what to do with the scarf so I held it in my hand and let it soak up all the sweat from my palm.
You, Ignacio, right away ditched me at this party to talk to some kid in your art class. Left me in the middle of the room. I stared at everyone, not knowing where to go. There was a dude dressed like Billy Corgan, a bald cap, silver pants and black shirt with “zero” ironed on the front. He smoked a cigarette and straight up ashed on the floor. Then I looked at the floor, your usual crunchy brown carpet. Where was her grandma? I thought. Then I remembered that lady always liked to take weekend trips to Vegas on a bus and leave Petra all alone. Another party girl had on a white shirt, black pants, and her hair styled in a brown bob. She tapped a fake syringe to her chest. Mrs. Mia Wallace from Pulp Fiction. When she stood up from the leather couch, the couch moved with her. Three dudes dressed up like the Crow, all black clothes, mime makeup, talked to each other, and held plastic red cups. They stood around the punch bowl at the kitchen table. I was surprised the table was round and made of solid wood. I walked over to the bowl and scooped myself some punch into a cup. The three crow guys nodded. One of them said, “What’s your costume of?” I thought fast. “Alanis Morissette,” I said. The Crow guy laughed. “She’s okay I guess.” Then Petra called to me from the hallway and I followed her. Glad to get away.

During most of the party, I ended up sitting on the edge of Petra’s bed while she showed me her collage of Courtney Love and Kurt Cobain. All of their peach faces, their blonde hairs, layered on each other in one big heart over her wall. I drank my punch in like three gulps. I could only tell there was alcohol from the afterburn. Petra laughed, “You might want to slow down there.” I shrugged. She looked at the mirror on the opposite wall and asked if I remembered playing Bloody Mary with her one Halloween in
the basement at school in fourth grade. “I hadn’t thought about it in a long time,” I told her, “but yeah.” She said it really messed her up, nightmares non-stop. She didn’t even want to repeat what she saw. She smoked a cigarette. Her red lipstick smeared across her chin. I told her, “Maybe we should do it again? Face the fear.” Petra shook. “No way,” she said. And she left the room to go get more punch.

Petra’s mirror hung over a vanity table. Round with a gold filigree frame. I got up from the edge of the bed and locked the door. I turned off the light. The moonlight peeked through the blinds in the window, enough for me to see without bumping into things. The party was like one big mumble. I stood in front of the mirror. Stared at the outline of me with my face in the shadows. I said my mother’s name three times, “Carolina Flores, Carolina Flores, Carolina Flores.”

In time, I saw a jasmine flower unfold it’s petals in the mirror. My mother’s face popped out of its center. Her skin looked soft and brown again. And then I saw her eyes, just two tiny dots of light in them. Her mouth opened and all of these spiders crawled out all over her face like rippling black smoke. I couldn’t scream, stuck in place, the fear rushed through me in hot and cold sweaty waves. “You gotta let me go,” she said. Her voice sounded like when me and you talked into the floor fan as kids, all shaky. “You gotta get it all out and let me go.” And then her image flickered and dissolved. I screamed. Grabbed my stomach and fell to the floor. All of the sadness I carried inside of me, keeping part of my mother’s light here, so unnatural, Iggy, it all came out of me in one glowing stream.
The night before the Sweet and Tender Hooligans show at the Waters Club I dreamt about you know who. We lay on the grass in the middle of a forest looking up at the night. None of the trees had leaves, just sharp branches cut into the sky. Hundreds of stars streaked the night like a loco kind of crying mixed with laughter. We held hands and I turned to face him. He was part chino, just like Brandon Lee, and black hair draped in front of his face. He wore a leather jacket and before I could say anything he said, “Don’t worry. It’s pleather.” And then he pulled me into him. I laid my head on his chest. He purred like a cat, but I didn’t question it. In dreams we just accept things as they are. They’re funny like that.

I made you cut my hair before the concert, in your bathroom, on your side of the duplex. I sat on the toilet seat and you stood behind me. Your hands worked through my ponytail and made it into one thick braid, tied it off at the ends, and then let it hang there. “Do it,” I told you. You stretched out the braid. “Iggy, come on,” I said. You scissored through my hair until the braid was free in your hand and all of its heaviness lifted from me. You picked up the clippers and flicked them on. It buzzed and tickled me as you moved the clippers all the way around my head. The pieces of hair floated to the floor. You snipped and trimmed what was left of my hair into a quiff, brushed my face with a dry towel to get the loose hairs off. I got up to look at myself in the medicine cabinet mirror, my hands went up to my mouth, laughing. I was a female Moz.
When Uncle Dino asked me what was going on with my hair. I told him I was expressing myself. “Expressing what?” He said, “Stupidity?” Your dad is verbally abusive I swear. Tía just lingered on me, ran her hand through my hair once, but didn’t say anything. She didn’t seem to care about nothing after my mamá died. All she liked to do was sit in front of the window and drink tea. Abuelo came over looking for me to eat dinner before the show. Me and you sat on the couch and watched him pace in front of the TV. “Every time I come home, you two are doing something stupid,” he said. He pointed to me, “What are you supposed to be?” We couldn’t help but laugh. But this time, instead of just throwing up his hands, he got so mad, his face got hot and red. He pointed at us and said we could forget about the show. We stopped laughing real fast.

We were each sent to our rooms. I put on The Queen is Dead CD and listened to the whole album. Did you hear me sometimes through the walls of the duplex? Sometimes I heard you, Iggy, crying in the middle of the night with Moz singing in the background all of the things you felt. I wasn’t gonna cry. I just wasn’t gonna listen to nobody. We were going to the concert. I stood and put on my “Viva Hate” shirt with Moz’s devilish face in shadows. I wore tight ripped-up black jeans and laced up my vegan Docs. I lined my eyes like a cat’s and painted my mouth black. I even made a kissy face in the mirror. I opened the window with the missing screen, put one leg over the sill, and listened for any adult footsteps. The cold puffed out of my mouth and the grass smell was everywhere. I hopped down from my window and took two steps over to yours and tapped. You slid the window open real slow. “What’s going on?” you said, eyes all red. “We’re going. Let’s go!” I hissed. You leaped from the bed and threw on some clothes.
Dangled your skinny legs over the window. Hopped down. The two of us slid the window closed, our palms on the pane, so no one heard.

When we got off the bus downtown, the line at the Waters Club stretched all the way down the street. We found our spot at the end and tucked our arms inside our shirts, hugged ourselves to keep warm, our sleeves flapped in the wind. You wore your Meat Is Murder shirt with the dirty army guy. And I got worried about you because you weren’t eating very much. Your eyes had dark circles and Abuelita was going loca trying to get you to eat some meat. I’m not telling you to eat meat, Iggy. I stopped doing it. But you gotta eat something. Promise me you will. The doorman, a big baldheaded guy, took our five dollars. He held it in his fat hands and glared at us for a moment. “You sixteen?” he asked. We nodded even though we were only fourteen. We held out our right hands into fists and he stamped each of us with a smiley face. The ink bled into my skin.

Inside florescent blue lights lined the area where the ceiling and the wall met. We went to the center of the dance floor and pushed ourselves close to the stage. Music played while we waited, a soft woman’s voice, like a lullaby. It was the Cranberries. The girls wore fake flowers in their hair and polka dot dresses. The boys wore wallet chains and cuffed their pants. Some white guys dressed like you did for Halloween, nerd glasses, and flowers in their back pockets. Cholos with flannel shirts and those white socks they pull up to their knees. Not a lot of people wore band shirts, and I sweated a little because I got nervous and felt lame, but I let the feeling pass through me. Moved from my head all the way down to my stomach and then it disappeared like magic.
You and me were the smallest people there. We both had our arms hung over the barricade. You shook your leg from being nervous and I told you to quit it. The lights dimmed and a rumble came through the speakers. The band walked onto the stage. The singer had heavy lidded eyes, but his quiff was high. His body twisted with the song and his arms waved just like Morrissey in the VHS tape we watched a hundred times. The voice wasn’t high enough though. I ignored the bodies pressed up on me and kept my eyes on the man who played Moz. I squinted so my vision got blurry and I told myself it was him. I could smell the daffodils in his back pocket when he collapsed to the floor and crushed them. The lights burned on his sweaty skin. Out of nowhere, you climbed up on the barricade, one foot on the rail, and flung yourself onto the stage. You wrapped your arms around the fake Morrissey. Did he really smell like rosewater like you said? Did you feel his voice vibrate in your chest when you hugged him? Did his sweat drip onto your face and into your mouth? Was it salty or sweet? I bet it was sweet. The bouncers peeled you from him and dragged you by the arm off stage. Your other arm reached toward him, your hand opened and closed, but grabbed nothing.

I turned around and looked at the crowd trying to find you and then I saw him, the guy from my dream. Black hair swept in front of his eyes, and his eyes, it was just like how they always say they lock when you recognize someone you never even met. Well, that happened. He smiled. And then the two of us pushed through the crowd until we found each other. Guapo, with a manly jaw, but still pretty from the deep curve of his upper lip. After our staring contest I felt something hit me, like a rush of energy in my stomach. And I heard myself think: he’s the one. And then I saw all of this light behind
his eyes, just like the light of my mamá’s soul when it went out the window. I know you think it’s all caca. But it’s not.

I said, “I don’t even know you.” Felix ran his hand through my hair and brought his face real close to mine. And then he did this weird thing; he rubbed his face against my face like a cat, kind of like in my dream. Our breaths felt hot and I was glad I chewed a mint before the show. He pressed his lips to mine…I’ll stop here. You know what happened next. Because when I found you outside after the concert was over, and everyone was spilling out of the club, your whole face took in Felix. I saw your eyes turn soft, like stars were gonna shoot out of them. And then you saw my black lipstick smeared all over his lips. And then you got droopy again. Like one of Morrissey’s crushed flowers.

We took the bus ride in silence. Felix got off on Gaffey Street right before our stop on Alma. You talked to me without even looking at me, with your head leaned up against the window of the bus. There was graffiti scratched into it. Right near your head someone carved: fuck, with a little f. “What’s his name?” you whispered. “Felix,” I said. You sighed and I had this picture of you in my head. Sitting next to your mom at the front window of the duplex. Drinking tea and watching the pedestrians and cars pass down Alma Street. Please don’t end up like her. Promise me.
In English class, Mrs. Boswell wrote the word CITY on the chalkboard, with an arrow pointing to FOREST, and another arrow looped back to CITY. She placed the chalk down. Her hands covered in yellow dust. She ran her hand through her hair anyway and let it fall to her shoulders. Blonde like a lion’s mane. Mrs. Boswell went on with the lecture. “Every story,” she said, “is about this structure. Every character chooses, or is thrown into the forest, and when the forest spits them out, the city is always different from the city they knew.” When I came back to school from my mom dying, I swear, sometimes the other kids just ran away from me when they’d see me in the hall, chavalas. I don’t care about this city anymore, Iggy.

I went to the Enchilada House on 1st Street. I sat at the benches just inside the gated patio, near the window, and sipped a mandarin Jarritos while I waited for my food, potato tacos with no cheese. Felix was supposed to meet me there. I smelled vanilla and turned around and there he was. He had a pen behind his right ear, wore a Smiths shirt, vegan Doc Martens, and a pleather jacket with tiny silver chains dangling from the shoulders. The top hairs of his partly shaved head hung loose, turquoise in color, and seemed to change from blue to green in the sun. “You dyed your hair,” I said. He smiled and grabbed my hand. I looked down. His fingernails cut into sharp tips. “Why’d you do that to your fingernails?” I asked. He blushed and put his hands in his jacket pockets. “I don’t know,” he said. “I was bored.” We were into the goth thing, but claws are too much for me. Then I stared at him. His eyes got soft and for a while we stared and took deep
breaths together. He asked me about you. “He’s in love with me isn’t he?” he said. I told him, “I don’t know. I think so.” Felix sighed. “But I love you.” He stroked my cheek with his weirdo fingernails and then I realized I loved him too because I didn’t want to take a pair of clippers and cut his nails. I actually liked how they felt when he ran his hand through my hair like a comb. I loved his weirdo fingernails.

In English class me and you wrote notes to each other. You’d fold them into thick triangles and flick them to me with your fingers. Sometimes I’d hold up my hands to make a goal mark like in football. The last note you wrote to me was the week after the Sweet and Tender Hooligans show. I want to read it to you now:

Angela, I’m glad you cried at Petra’s party and got all of the sadness you’ve been holding onto out of you. But I don’t think what you saw in the mirror was your mamá. I think when you don’t let yourself feel things, they come up, and bug you. What I mean is, I think what you saw in the mirror was your own mind telling you you weren’t letting go of the sadness. It’s the same thing like when you thought you saw a ball of light leave her when she died. Your mind was trying to understand that she died. Does this make sense? –Iggy

Here’s what I wrote back:

Ignacio, How dare you say “if” I saw her soul. I saw it. And for you to say it’s not real, that’s your opinion. So don’t be forcing your point of view on me like it’s the truth. I know what the truth is and I know what I saw. It feels like you’re trying to take something away from me. I’m so glad I met Felix. He actually gets all this stuff unlike you. –Angela
Then you folded the note back up. Flicked it onto my desk. We haven’t talked since.

We read Romeo and Juliet in English class. Ms. Boswell asked us what we thought and you raised your hand, “They like just met and suddenly they are in love. I don’t believe it.” I whipped my head around and said to you, “You don’t believe because you never had it happen to you so you don’t understand.” Mrs. Boswell took in a breath. Told me to calm down, her voice like chimes. I always loved how Mrs. Boswell wore those long skirts with the tie around the waist, with those bells at the ends of them jingling when she’d walk. She went up to the board and wrote down: “What you believe is just another version of the truth.” She went on to lecture. I looked at you Iggy. Straight at you. And you looked right through me like I wasn’t even there.

At the library, you know that mural of kids playing in the tide pools? One kid holds a starfish and a drop of water runs off the arm. I always think that this starfish is crying for the time spent in the water. How it will miss the silky touch of the seaweed on its bumpy skin. Reminds me of before my mamá died. Me and Felix found a corner near the science-fiction books. We sat on the floor up against the wall. He held me while we spent the whole day taking turns reading *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury. It’s about how humans took over Mars because they destroyed Earth. The Martians were just on Mars minding their own business. “Humans,” Felix said, “they don’t think about how everything that they do affects the future.” But then he said that it’s the same as the past. Before I could ask more about it, he got up and said we needed to catch the last bus home. Then I thought about the past, maybe the change happens if we change the way we
think about it? Then the past isn’t this thing that you try to shove into a box in the attic.

But just another part of your story that you’ve learned from and then can let go.

Iggy, I catch you sometimes. The way you look at other people when they hold hands. How you hold yourself, arms wrapped around your skinny chest, your sighs rolling out of your mouth like smoke. You started hanging out with Petra by the ditching fence. And I know you’ve been going to the graveyard with her. Me and Felix sit on the porch and you reek like cigarettes and weed when you come home. Skinnier and skinnier you’re getting. Your shirts hang on you like rags. One day, home alone, I knew you were with Petra. I heard your parents’ TV through the living room wall. I hopped out of my bedroom window and tapped on yours. I put my hands around my face and peered inside your room. You forgot to lock the window you been smoking out of in the middle of the night, so I opened it, pulled myself up, flung one leg over, and then rolled onto your bed. I looked through your stuff. Nothing but schoolwork in your desk drawers. Clothes hung up in the closet. Books alphabetized on the case. Then I looked under your bed. The mason jar half filled with brown water and floating cigarette butts, and your diary. I sat on your bed with the green cloth diary in my lap. I opened the page where you stuck the ribbon bookmark and saw a picture you drew of Felix. He was leaning up against a lamppost at night, hands in his pockets, and smirking. On the page next to it was a list:

**My Soul Mate**

1. Loves Morrissey.
2. Smells like vanilla.
3. Looks like Brandon Lee.
4. Understands how the universe works.

5. Loves my cousin Angela because she is the most important person to me.

The date was the night before the *Sweet and Tender Hooligans* show, the night we met Felix. The page was smeared with your tears. The letters on your list bled into the paper. You tried to believe in magic and it smacked you in the face. I don’t know why this happens like this sometimes. Maybe it’s like what Mrs. Boswell said. Maybe your mind is in the forest right now even though your body is in the city. Maybe this is the test. I feel like a puta for not coming to you and talking to you, Iggy. I’m sorry. I hope this tape will be enough. If only I had the courage to give it to you sooner. Te quiero.
Felix tapped at my window. I got up from my bed, slid the pane open, and he kissed me before crawling into my room. He kissed me with teeth hard against my lips. I should say we did it slow. That the song on the radio was something romantic and ballad like, and that when he was on top of me, he was real gentle. But the truth is it happened fast; our clothes off in seconds. There was an awkward pause when he read the directions off the condom box. We sat up on my bed with our legs wrapped around each other. Our cheeks wet from crying. We tried to be quiet, but I felt you through the wall Iggy. All of your sadness coming at us like a hook. I pictured the wall of our duplex turning to stone. As I stared into Felix’s eyes, I finally understood the saying about melting into a person. I stared at my own brown eyes instead of his for a second like we switched bodies. We fell back onto my bed and breathed into each other’s faces. Petted each other’s sweaty hairs.

Our noses pressed together. “I could stare at you forever,” he said. And I didn’t mean to laugh and get my spit on his face. He wiped his cheek and then laughed with me. I played with the necklace around his neck; the one with the geometric shapes. “I never asked you what this meant,” I said. “You know what it means. You just forgot. It’s oneness.” Right then his teeth changed. The canines looked longer, sharper. I got real scared, sat up, and started putting on my clothes. I thought I was seeing things, like loopy from doing it. “You better go before my Abuelita comes knocking on my door or something.” He got up slowly, stretched his arms, and arched his back. He put his clothes back on, and mi dios Ignacio, he turned around to look at himself in the mirror, fix his
hair, and on either side of his head were two pointy ears, black and furry. My whole body went numb. I blinked but couldn’t see, everything turned fuzzy like a bad TV station. I fell onto my bed without making a sound, passed right out.

I woke up to Felix wiping my forehead with his shirt. His pupils stretched. Like a cat’s. Felix was a cat. Like Felix the freaking cat. I went to scream and he put his hand on my mouth and I don’t know what the heck he did, but my whole body went calm. I felt light, like I could float from my bed to the ceiling. He said, “Shh, Angela. Don’t be scared. Please, not of me.” He sat me up and told me to take his hand. I did. We walked over to the mirror above my dresser. A pair of bright gold eyes looked back at me instead of my usual brown. The pupils shaped like black diamonds.

A memory flashed. On Planet Felid we eat purple-colored fruits like pomegranates. There’s an instrument like a mini saxophone mixed with a harp. It sounds like techno music with bird samples. I danced and wore a belt with dangling bells like Mrs. Boswell. Felix sat on a log in front of the bonfire and stared at me as I danced. I felt all of his energy, light and soft, like fresh cloth. I scooped it all up and around me and twirled it like a skirt in a jarabe dance. Everyone could see it, the colors, a mix of light pinks and greens. Because nothing is hidden on Felid like it is on Earth.

Felix held me and rocked me on the floor of my bedroom while I told him this memory. He told me about the quake that happened on Earth, in an alternate timeline, a time right beside yours, Iggy. No Earthquake is coming in your future so don’t worry. The only place left was California, like an island. We Felids have been helping the humans rebuild. Felids are born with the ability to read each other’s minds. Telepathy. Because of
this we see ourselves as one. We have a hard time understanding individual minds. It’s why I shape-shifted my body into a human one. A baby. Carolina Flores has lost hers in a miscarriage. But then she found me on wrapped in a blanket on a bench near the cliffs at Point Fermin. It was 1980, an alternate timeline without the quake. I came so I could understand you guys. But I had forgotten who I really was.

What I’m taking with me are memories: the smell of my mother’s perfume like musk. Tía, your mamá, sitting with her back perfectly straight while she drank tea and stared out the window. Uncle Dino’s face relaxing when he’d look at tía and she didn’t even know he was looking at her. Abuelita’s slippers flip-flopping on the concrete while she walks around the duplex. The bubbling noises of the coffee maker in the morning and hearing Abuelo taking his first sip and going, “Ahhh.” How when our friend Petra flexes her fingers into a V when she takes a drag off of her cigarette. And you, Iggy. When I watch you looking at the world around you. Like you’re trying to see through it. Like there’s something else there. Something more pure. And there is. But it’s not as beautiful. Trust me.

In the morning, I’ll wear sunglasses to hide my cat eyes. I’ll give our Abuelos each a big long hug. They’ll ask me what’s going on with me, but they won’t ask too hard because they’ll like the change. I’ll go to your place next door. I’ll walk right into your room. Your face will be to the wall. I’ll tell you I love you in Spanish because then you know I’m being real. I’ll leave this tape on your desk and close the door on my way out. Uncle Dino will make some joke about my clothes and I’ll tell him comedians always joke about their greatest source of pain. He’ll raise an eyebrow. I’ll go over to tía near the
window and whisper in her ear, something about staying in the moment. I’ll walk away from the duplex. Without looking behind me.

I’m to walk down to Point Fermin Park, near the cliffs, where Felix will be waiting for me at a bench overlooking the ocean. The cold air will swirl the dirt up from the side of the cliffs and smack our faces. He’ll hold my hand and we’ll shift back into ourselves. No longer Felix. No longer Angela. But we’ll always keep those human parts inside of us. We’ll slide out of our clothes and let them fall to the ground. And shape-shift back into our feline bodies. Then a portal will open. It will hum and vibrate in our pointy ears. A coil of energy will pulse in the space above the edge of the cliffs and we’ll walk through it, back to home. And no one will see this. Because if someone isn’t ready to accept the truth, they’ll find every way they can to not see it.

This is it. The end of my side of the tape. I want to leave you with something okay? On Felid, the most famous human poet is called Rumi and he said this: “Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.” Iggy, the love you want…it’s yours. You already have it. It can never be taken from you. Felix isn’t the one for you. But it doesn’t mean you can’t find someone else to give you the same feeling. There’s no limit to love, Iggy. It’s everywhere and in everything. It’s what we’re all made of.
Angela. I listened to your side of the tape over a hundred times now. I made copies in case it wears out. I hide them in a shoebox underneath my bed. Today is my birthday. I look at all the goth girls in the hallways at school and how tall they grew from the time you started and finished your tape. How much their shirts filled out. How they put their makeup on like women now, red lips instead of black, and cat eyed liner instead of raccoon shadow. I wonder if you would look different now. Even though it's been only a month since you’ve gone. How your hair grew out from the quiff. Perhaps you even dyed it blue or pink. And Felix. Would he still have his hair falling in front of his eyes? Would he still be that committed to wearing his pleather jacket? You put all of that crazy stuff at the end of the tape. I don’t believe you’ll ever get this recording. Because I think you are dead. And I’m just using it as a release like my therapist told me to. So, I am going to pretend you’ll hear this somehow, I guess.

Abuelita said when she went to tell you goodnight you weren’t in your room. She checked under the bed, peeked in your closet, tugged on the locked window. I can imagine her slippered feet flip-flopping in circles on the linoleum floor of the kitchen. Not wanting to risk waking Abuelo who has to work early in the mornings. Instead, she left her side of the duplex, walked around it to the back, and tapped on my bedroom window. I couldn’t sleep. I was lying in my bed listening to “Vauxhall and I” on my stereo real low so I didn’t wake up my parents. I ignored the tape you put on my desk that morning. It sat there all day. “Ignacssssoooo,” Abuelita whispered. I opened my
screenless window. I asked her what she was doing, but she didn’t answer me. She stuck
her head into my room and looked all around it. She asked me if you were here and I told
her no. She frowned and the worry built up in lines on her forehead. I put on my hoodie
and climbed out of the window to help her find you.

The cold grass wet my socked feet. I followed Abuelita around our duplex,
through the side gate, and out onto the sidewalk. “I can’t find her,” she said. And she
muttered to herself in Spanish. We looked around the neighborhood street. Silence except
for chirping crickets. The road wet from the fog rolling in. A dog barked. A black lab sat
on the sidewalk across the street under a streetlamp looking up. A pair of eight-hole Docs
hung on the telephone wire by their tied together laces above him. I knew right away they
were yours. I recognized the white pen writing all around the bottom rim of the boots. I
couldn’t see clearly but knew what was written on them. Our names, band names, and my
favorite tag: WWMD? As in “What would Morrissey do?” Tell me something, Angela. If
everything you said on the tape was true, then why didn’t you talk about your shoes?
Why did you put them there? What does it mean? I created this story in my head: Angela
Flores was hit by a truck. Shot right out of her shoes because she was too lazy to lace
them up. Because it was the middle of the night and everyone was asleep, they only
rolled over in their beds at the sound of screeching tires, the thump of the impact, and
went back to their dreams while the driver took the victim’s body to hide it somewhere,
and because part of him felt bad, he hung Angela’s shoes on the telephone wire so her
family would know not to bother looking for her.
The black labrador followed Abuelita to the house. He jumped around her in circles and barked. “Cállate,” she told him. He jumped on her, his paws touching her shoulders, until she gave in and told him, “You can stay if you find Angela.” Abuelita put her hand to her chest, her breath quick and heaving. Saying it aloud had made it real for her, and for me too. She circled the dog, waving her hands, nudging him, trying to get him to move out from the porch. “Vámonos,” she said to him. “Go already,” she breathed. I don’t remember passing out.

I woke up on the couch in my living room. My father said he couldn’t take this anymore and cursed in Italian. I didn’t hear my mother. I’m sure she still had a zombie look on her face since Tía, your mom, died. *This could be our second*, I thought to myself. My face became hot and my body broke out into a cold sweat and I couldn’t get warm. My sight went blurry. I stared at the blank wall in the living room. The light from the lamp nearby expanded and grew to the size of a door shaped like a lemon. In it I saw your silhouette. Your hair was long and you wore a dress to your ankles. But I knew it was you because you gave me the devil horns. And then you were gone. The wall was blank again. The light from the lamp shrunk and I was alone in the room. My therapist said we process our pain through dreams.

The last time I saw you was that morning. I just woke up but didn’t feel like saying good morning to anyone so I stayed in bed. I heard the front door open, my mother say hello to you, and you said hello back. I didn’t want to talk to you. I was still mad about the note you gave me in English class. Still sad about Felix. I pulled the covers over my face. You knocked lightly on my door and then opened it. “Iggy,” you said. I
closed my eyes to help me act like I was really sleeping. Faced the wall with my back to you. “You can’t ignore me right now, okay?” you said. I heard the plastic of the cassette tape clink against the surface of the desk. “I’m going to go now, Iggy,” you said. “I’m sorry. Te quiero.” You closed the door behind you as you left. I realize now your sorry was really a goodbye.

I went back to my room. The police came, their heavy boots stomped inside our duplex. Did you know out of everyone Abuelo cried the hardest? I think he’d been holding it in since your mom died. My mom told me, because I refused to leave my room, the cops put blankets on him. I sat on my bed, holding the cassette tape. It was all of my most favorite Morrissey songs. I traced your loopy handwriting with my index finger. I still had hope then that we’d find you. The police knocked on my door. I told them to come in. The cop looked real sincere. The other one, bored and tired, stared at my bookcase. The nice one sat on the edge of my bed and asked me how I felt. I shrugged. He asked about the last time I saw you and I told him that you came in and said you loved me before you left. But I had a sour feeling in my stomach. And it was to not tell them about the tape. I didn’t know what was on it yet, but I didn’t want any more of you taken from me. The cops mostly asked about Felix. I had no idea where he lived, no one did, except for you, I thought. But from what it sounds like, he did all the visiting. He never was enrolled in our school. No one knew his parents. It was like he never existed. I would believe it if I hadn’t seen him with my own eyes.

After the cops left, everyone took turns sleeping on the couch. No one wanted to be alone in a room except for me. Morning was coming. The sky was a light grey color.
And I heard a whimpering from the dog. I opened my window. “Hey doggie,” I said to
him. He danced in circles. I put on my shoes and then hopped out my window. I let him
chase me around the backyard. Then he took off down the side of the house, out to the
street, and ran right down it. I yelled after him. Chased him. All the way to Point Fermin
Park. The fog rolled in like a big wave. Goosebumps rose all over my arms and I tried to
rub them warm. The dog ran, stopped, ran, and barked the whole way to the park like
Lassie. I named him Lassie. I followed him to the bench you talked about on your tape
during the last track. I saw it Angela, your guys’ clothes. But only the Morrissey and
Smiths shirts. Nothing else. And I grabbed both of your shirts. Brought them to my face. I
was all alone except for the dog. I sat on the cold cement walkway of the park and cried
on the bench until the sun came. I cried so hard that the dog howled with me. When I was
done, I turned your t-shirts inside out and wore them home. No one noticed them on me
as I walked into the house. I went straight to my room, took off the shirts, folded them
and put them under my bed. My therapist doesn’t believe any of this part about the dog.
Now I know why we sometimes keep these stories to ourselves.
It’s been two months and people still bring flowers to the cliffs. They lean photos of you and him up against the metal fence that the city put up because too many people have jumped over the years. There’s veladora candles and rotting flowers there still. That’s what everyone thinks happened, Angela; you and Felix did a double suicide. Everyone’s calling you two the Romeo and Juliet couple. But we don’t even know if it’s true. Our Abuelos leave the front door open, just the security door is closed, even if it gets cold at night. They make my parents do the same. They’re waiting for you guys. I know I said in the last recording I thought you were dead, but I’m not so sure now. Because your bodies were never found, just T-shirts on the benches near the edge, and it doesn’t make any sense to me.

In science class, Petra tossed me a note. It said to meet her after class near the cliffs. I wrote back “yes” and folded it in half twice. I tossed her the note while the teacher had her back to us. I kept my head low at my desk until the bell rang. When I heard Petra’s boots walk past me, I looked up, her Manic Panic purple hair flipped to the side. She held an unlit white veladora candle and placed it on my desk. I waited until everyone shuffled out of the class. When the teacher flipped through papers and books on her desk, I looked at the candle. Written with a Sharpie, right on the glass, was the phrase: Angela & Felix Lives! I took a deep breath. Surprised that it wasn’t short for once.
At the cliffs of Point Fermin, there’s a stretch of concrete that sticks out over the rocky beach below. The call it the diving board. Everyone thinks it’s where you and Felix jumped, but I found your clothes on the bench near the gate that blocks off Sunken City. I met Petra there. She was already sitting on the bench, smoking a cigarette. I sat down beside her. In front of us were all the flowers, gladioluses, pictures of you and Felix, and candles flickering their tiny flames inside their glass holders. “I’ve been moving them over here,” she told me. “Because this is where they disappeared. This is where you found their shirts.” The morning you and Felix were gone, Petra said she woke up early, went outside and found Felix’s doc martens on her porch. She’s been wearing them ever since. Without looking at me, she took a drag off of her cigarette and said, “They’re all signs you know.” I told her I didn’t believe in signs. She told me it didn’t matter if I did or didn’t. She handed me a cigarette.

Me and Petra crawled through the hole under the gate and walked through Sunken City. The concrete is all broken and layered, like messed up teeth. I don’t know if you’ve ever been there, Angela, but it looks like the end of the world did come to my timeline. I don’t really understand the whole timeline thing by the way. There were broken beer bottles, roaches, the weed kind, and almost every blank slate of concrete was painted or tagged. We stopped at this one of a naked lady looking up at the stars. “Let’s sit here,” Petra said. “Why are we here?” I asked. She looked at me like she could see inside me, like she could look into my body and tell me what was wrong with my organs. “You need to eat something, dude,” she said. I didn’t say anything back to her. It’s been hard for me to eat. You knew this before you left. It got worse. I just don’t feel hungry. Even though
my stomach makes those squeaky noises in class. I take a bite of food and it feels like I have to use everything in me to chew, my jaw feels so tight, sometimes I’m afraid it’ll get stuck closed. Petra pulled a Twinkie out of her backpack and tossed it to me. I tossed it back to her. She knows I don’t do dairy. “You think they’re alive still, don’t you?” I asked her. I had played her your tape. I even made her a copy. “I know it,” she said. I didn’t ask how she knew. Her answer was always she could feel it. She gazed out at Sunken City, at the stretch of crooked concrete that went out into the ocean like a pier. At the end of it was a palm tree. The leaves swayed like “come here.” She got up and started to walk towards it. I wanted to keep sitting, but I wanted to see why she was going over there. I had to look down at my feet, watch every step I took, so I didn’t fall and end up being called another jumper. There was no way I was going to have my face taped next to yours on the gate. No glass candles for me. Of course, that’s all everyone ever thought of me. In fact, a lot of people were surprised it was you and not me. The wind blew so hard it made a whistling sound. I grabbed the tree so I didn’t get taken into the waters. Petra circled the tree and on the side facing the ocean, there was Felix’s jacket, and your black and white flannel nailed to it. I didn’t even bother telling my therapist about this one. Sometimes she looks at me and tenses up and I can tell she thinks I’m lying to her about these things. It’s becoming harder and harder now for me not to believe something strange is really going on.

We haven’t had a funeral. But some of the kids at school have been having séances in the graveyard on Grand Avenue. Some said they saw the bodies. Watched them float away. I heard one kid say he summoned your ghost and the entire left side of your
face was caved in. It’s been two months and people still put things near your locker. And in a year, there’ll be tell stories about how if you stand too close to the cliffs, you’ll hear the voice of a fourteen-year-old girl and her boyfriend crying for someone to come down and join them. That’s how it always goes here in Pedro. They always have to turn everything into a horror story.

Later that night, I laid on the carpet in my bedroom and listened to your mixed-tape on my Walkman. Then I heard a tapping on my window. I separated the blinds with my fingers and saw Petra standing there. She was shaking in Felix’s jacket, the cold coming out of her breath. I pulled up the blinds and opened the window. Petra climbed through my window and we sat on the floor. She said hello. I said hello. She laid back, took the headphones and bent them so they made the shape of a memorial ribbon. I laid down next to her and we shared—one speaker to my left ear, one to her right ear. I was at the part where you described the Halloween party at her house. Petra stopped the tape player when the track ended. I rolled over and faced her. I finally told her about how I saw you when I woke up from passing out. She slapped me on the shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she said. I shrugged. “It was just a hallucination. That’s what my therapist said.” She rolled her eyes. “Therapists don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.”

In the morning, the sunlight peeked through the blinds of my window. Petra was in my arms. Her bright purple hair fanned out on my belly. When I’m really sad my tears feel hotter than normal. And this was how I was crying because I know I will never hold Felix like this. I can’t talk about him yet. Petra flinched and woke up. She looked around my room, disoriented. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” she said. She stood, brushed her
hands on her pants. Rubbed her right eye with a fist. I rolled up from the floor. “You can sleep here,” I told her. “You can come here anytime you want.” “Okay,” she said. And her eyes had a begging look in them, like all wide. I’m sure I looked the same. It was nice having someone with me. Feeling arms around me even though it was Petra and she was just a friend. I watched her climb out my window. With her sunglasses covering her eyes, she lit a cigarette. She told me to light the candle she gave me. I told I would entertain the idea. She laughed and said I would and then left. I went over to my desk where the candle she gave me was. I took the lighter out of my pocket and lit the wick. It sparkled and crackled and for a second I wondered if Petra was some kind of a witch. But it was probably a coincidence.

I used to watch you with Felix, during lunch hour, how he used to tuck you inside his pleather jacket when it was cold, your notebook to your chest. I used to think it must be real nice to have someone keep your back warm for you. Petra has been sleeping over every night. She crawls out of her bedroom window when her house is all asleep. She comes over and we whisper in my bed at night. We hold each other and that’s all we do. Sometimes I braid her hair. Sometimes she runs her fingers through my bangs. We listen to music. We listen to your tape. And every night she tries to convince me you guys aren’t dead. Even she can’t buy the alien story. She thinks the two of you ran off somewhere. Like those kids in one book we had read to us in elementary school. Where the brother and the sister run away and go live in a museum. Petra thinks it’s something like that. She says all we have to do is trust our dreams. It was her dream about the palm tree that led her to Sunken City and finding the jackets. She has a gut feeling that once we find all of
your clothes, everything will make sense. I told her none of it makes sense. But I know this is what you were talking about, Angela, the faith thing. I guess I’ll try it. What do I have left to lose?
I only talked to Felix alone one time. I wanted to get a Coke even though it was real cold out. I went to the Enchilada House and there he was sitting on the bench, eating. “Hey Iggy,” he said with a big smile. I waved. I couldn’t even squeak out a hello. I ordered a Coke and felt his presence there, heavy, like a rock. I waved goodbye after I got my drink and I guess I forgot my wallet on the ledge of the take out window because I heard someone running up beside me, boots slapping the gravel. I looked and it was Felix and he was holding my wallet. “You left this,” he said. And I could smell the vanilla coming off of him. I told him it was okay and I tried to get away from him because he flipped his hair and it fell onto the side of his face. He smiled and left me there staring at the back of his head while he ran his fingers through his faded blue hair.

I wear shirts Petra decorates with star-shaped patches. I pierced my ear and got shoved into the lockers at school more than once for it. I wore your flannel everyday since I found it. It makes me feel like if I wear it, I’ll find your scent, like some kind of dog, and track you and bring you home. The other day when I came back to science class from the bathroom, I opened my folder and inside was the note: *You got Angela’s shirt in your backpack today?* In blue pen I wrote “yes.” The letters small and all in caps like runes. I tossed the note with the circled yes onto Petra’s desk. I’ve been carrying your shirt with me sometimes when I go to school. After a minute, I got a crumpled up note. I smoothed it out. *Meet me at lunch by the portal?* I wrote “yes” again but asked her why?
And she said nothing but smirked at me. She must have had another one of her crazy dreams about how to find you and Felix.

The portal, not the one you and Felix left this “timeline” from, is the gate that faces onto 17th Street with the hole in it. Everyone at school uses it to ditch. I don’t know why they haven’t closed it up yet. Me and you ditched once, for my birthday last year, remember? We took the bus to the train station and took the train all the way to San Diego. It was the closest we’d ever been to Mexico, where most of our family is from, and we still couldn’t see it. We spent the day at the beach, a clean beach where there wasn’t any trash hidden in the sand. The water seemed to sparkle more and there were less people. You stood near the lip of the waves with your arms open. I stood with my arms hugging my chest like I always do. My nose red and sniffing. In the distance, we saw dolphins. Three or four of them on the horizon. Their grey bodies blending in the color of the water. They were jumping and swimming farther out, until they were specks, until we couldn’t see them anymore. You told me even though it was my birthday, it was the best birthday you had ever had. Because it was secret made it more important. Even though it was just a beach and just some dolphins.

Petra was smoking near the portal and she handed me the cigarette, asking if I wanted a drag and I took it. She crawled through the hole in the chain link fence and I hesitated. She put her hand out and said, “Come on.” I said to her, “Where are we going? Looking for more clues?” “Yep,” was all she said. I grabbed her hand and went through. It was like the world became clearer, the car noises sharper, but all I could feel was her
hand, smothering mine. I wondered if that was what it felt like to cross time. But such a thing is impossible.

We walked down 15th all the way to Grand Avenue. “Where are we going?” I asked. “You’ll see,” she said. And when we turn down Grand, I know where she’s taking me, the old cemetery where all the graves are from the early 1900s. Like so many times before when me and you weren’t talking. The gate is open, but it’s completely silent and there’s no one in sight. It was overcast. The air smelled wet and fresh. The cemetery is small and the headstones are all tall and uneven. She led me to the back of the place and I tried not to step where I thought the bodies were under the earth, not because I thought a hand was going to come out and grab my ankle or anything, but because it’s disrespectful. “I thought we were looking for clues,” I said. “We are,” she said. We get to the shack and walk behind it. Petra sits on the grass and I sit next to her. She pulled out a small metal pipe and small bag of weed. “We’re just gonna take a break then?” I said. She laughed and pinched the green herb with her thumb and forefinger and stuffed it into the small metal bowl of the pipe. She brought out her lighter in the shape of a black skull from the pocket of Felix’s jacket. She was wearing his boots and his shirt too. I looked down at my feet and realized I was wearing your boots, Angela. I totally forgot about it. Petra looked me up and down. “Put her shirt on.” I didn’t bother to even ask why. I learned to just go with her weird ways. I put on your Morrissey shirt and then watched as she dipped the lighter’s flame into the pipe, lighting up the bud. She inhaled, held her breath, and then let out a long stream of smoke. She held the pipe and the lighter out to
me. I took a hit and coughed, my lungs still not used to the burn. She laughed and we went on like this until the weed went from green to black to ash.

My heart began to pound really fast and hard and I heard the blood running in my ears. “I feel scared this time for some reason,” I said. And Petra motioned for me to come lay with her in the grass and because it was cold, I fit myself in the crook of her arm, my face on her chest, part of her jacket, Felix’s jacket, was around me. I closed my eyes and was lost in a blackness that seemed to be pushing me forward into more nothingness until all of a sudden my mouth was moving and I felt skin on my lips and I opened my eyes just a little to see Petra’s closed eyelid and to feel the air from her nose on my cheek. I couldn’t taste anything, it was hard to feel her tongue, I was so stoned, but we were kissing and in my mind I kept saying to myself, we’re kissing. And then it started to sprinkle, the rain spotted her jacket, and then it came down even harder. We’re kissing in the rain and it felt better than the movies because I pretended it was Felix. It was like I tasted a thousand raindrops with each flick of our tongues. And he said he had loved me from the moment he saw me at the Waters Club, and I smelled like sugar, and my lips were beautiful, and full, and he always wanted a guy who wasn’t afraid to wear bangs and who liked the music he liked. And he stared deep into my eyes and told me to follow him inside the shack.

Inside the shack it was musty, cobwebs everywhere, and it smelled like mothball smells. There were about ten glass candles lit next to a sleeping bag on the floor and nearby were underwears, jeans, yours and Felix’s, the last piece of the puzzle. Petra took out her ponytail. Her hair hung in front of her chest, a pastel purple color now. She told
me she loved me, “Like Felix loves Angela.” She laid on the sleeping bag and then propped her head up with one hand. I laid down next to her. I felt cold and skinny next to her warm and fleshy body, somehow feeling naked even though we were fully clothed. The spell was broken. I couldn’t pretend she was Felix anymore. I put my back to her and she spooned me. “What’s this mean?” I asked her. She ran her hand through my hair. “I don’t know this time,” she said.

We put on the rest of your guys’ lost clothes. Petra took out a picture of you from the back pocket of Felix’s jeans. You’re standing at the edge of Point Fermin Park with the tree that bent over and decided to grow sideways. Petra held it open to me, the photo resting in her palm. I leaned in closer to look at the photo and I smelled her skin, lavender. She leaned in to kiss me again and I put my hands up. “Petra,” I said. She laid back onto the sleeping bag and lit a cigarette. “Tell me about how you called in Felix,” she said. And I told her. It was the middle of the night and it was a new moon, a silver thumbnail in the sky. All of my loneliness was swirling around me like smoke. I was tired. Fed up. I imagined all of my lonely smoke getting sucked up by the moon and the moon opened up and shined on me. I made a wish. Something I hadn’t done since Tía, your mom, was dying. I wished for her to live and she died. I wished for someone to love me and he couldn’t. I wished to find you Angela. I followed all of Petra’s stupid signs. We wore your clothes like talismans. And all that ended up happening was I got my first kiss from someone I wasn’t in love with. And even though it felt okay, maybe even a little comforting, it was not like how I imagined it in my dreams. In my dreams I kiss the person I love like I need their mouth to breathe. This is why I just live in my dreams,
because they can be what I want. And then I cried. It seems like that’s all I do. And Petra cried with me because I can’t love her like she wants me to. And we both just laid there stoned inside of a shack wearing our dead friends’ clothes, crying for you two and for ourselves. That’s reality.
I remember the first time I came to Sacred Grounds with you, Angela. It was the first time I drank coffee. It was too bitter and you told me to put more cream in it, and I did, until it was taupe. We were the only customers that day besides an old man reading the newspaper. You were always dragging me somewhere “to have fun” when I was feeling real gloomy. We huddled next to each other on the couch, our knees holding up a music magazine as we read it together. But I kept looking at the old man again who was reading the paper. All I could think of was my hair turning white and my skin becoming loose and dry like his. Then my heart began to race, because this is what happens when I start thinking about dying. Sometimes it gets so bad I can’t breathe and I’m all alone in my room in the middle of the night. It’s why I sleep with the light on. But I always felt safe because I knew you were on the other side of my bedroom wall. Sometimes just putting my hand there was enough. But after you were gone, and I put my hand on the wall and felt nothing, it was the most empty feeling. I had to stop.

I wanted to smell Felix again. Abuelo let me pick out the scent of air freshener after taking his car to wash. I picked vanilla and put the beige tree on the review mirror. After we got home and he parked, I grabbed the air freshener as he was getting out of the car. I pretended I didn’t know where it went when he asked about it. I kept it under my bed and sniffed it at night before I went to sleep. But all it did was make me miss someone who was never mine. So I had to stop doing that too.
I miss the cold and the rain. It’s getting warmer now. Most people here love the sun, but I’ve always liked it when it was gloomy. Not because I like feeling that way, but because it feels very romantic to me. Everyone is so attractive in the rain with their hairs wet. I went to Sacred Grounds Café by myself. Petra hasn’t talked to me since the last time we went to the graveyard. She says she just needs to be alone right now. The coffee shop still looks like a beat-up living room with couches and chairs with rips and stains in them. I got a hot tea and sat at a small table near the stage. There was a guy playing the acoustic guitar but I tuned him out. I brought a book of Oscar Wilde poetry with me from the library and tried to read it. It was hard to concentrate, not because of the guy singing, but because I kept thinking about everything. How Petra and me found you and Felix’s clothes scattered all over San Pedro. Was it a dream or a hallucination when I saw your image on the living room wall? Did you and Felix really jump off the cliffs or run away? Are aliens real? Was wearing your guys’ clothes just a way to finally get it that you two are gone? I went in circles and never even turned a page in the poetry book. I can’t even say what poem I had the book opened to.

I went next door to our Abuelos’ place afterwards. Abuelita’s dog, I call him Lassie and she just calls him perrito, was barking at me through the security door. I opened it and he jumped all over me with his pink tongue hanging out of his mouth. Abuelita was making dinner for her and Abuelo, some pot of something. “You wanna eat with us instead of your parents?” she asked me. “No,” I said and sat down at the kitchen table. Lassie put her head in my lap. I picked up an apple from the fruit bowl on the table and ate it. “You gotta eat more, Ignacio,” she said. I told her I will. I watched her cook
while I pet Lassie’s head. “Can the dog sleep with me tonight?” Abuelita looked at me. “Why? You sacred of the dark?” “Yes,” I said. She said okay and I got up and waved my hands at the dog to follow me. I got to the front door and Lassie stopped in the living room. I told him to come here, to follow me, but he sat on the ground and his ears went up. He tilted his head to one side because my home was not his and he didn’t want to leave his home. Who would?

I told myself I wasn’t going to be scared. I turned off the light in my room and ran to my bed. This is so embarrassing. I’m fifteen, Angela. Why am I scared of the dark? I brought the covers up to my chin and put my back to the wall. My heart was racing. I looked at my room, my desk, my open closet and all my hanging clothes, my bookcase. I stared at the alarm clock on my nightstand. I fixed my eyes on it for I don’t know how long. And the green numbers turned into orbs. And the orbs turned into eyes with black diamond-shaped pupils. And then the eyes got bigger and closer and my entire body was covered in sweat. I closed my eyes and opened them. The clock was just a clock again. I got up and turned on the light in my room and finally slept.

I went to Sacred Grounds again. That night they had karaoke. All of the kids from school were there. I scanned the crowd looking for Petra’s purple hair. There was this one guy on the stage and his face was just dripping in sweat and when he’d turn, I could see his white shirt was stuck to his back. He had a pack of cigarettes he rolled up in his sleeve. He was shaking his fist in the air and singing some punk song I didn’t know. I found a piece of wall nearby the stage to lean against. I folded my arms and just stared at each person who went up on the stage. I thought about Petra a lot in that moment. I
missed her coming to my window at night. I missed her hugs. I missed chain smoking with her and writing zines. Yeah, we were actually making things. Not just crying and smoking pot together. I would have given anything to see her on the stage singing “Doll Parts” by Hole. But instead it was just a high school girl with long brown hair all in her face singing Alanis Morissette very badly. I mean screeching. People were actually covering their ears. I know this is mean but I thought: If I was gonna sing it’d be after her. Then I couldn’t lose. And I felt something I never felt before. It was like a million bubbles going throughout my entire body.

I went up to the DJ and asked him if he had any Morrissey or the Smiths. The guy had one of those golf hats and a windbreaker. He probably only listened to techno music, like Orbital or something. But I had a feeling he also liked Morrissey. That’s the thing about Moz. You think his fan base is just us kids from LA. But I bet if I sat my dad down, you know my dad, anything emotional and he starts squirming in his chair unless a person is dying. I bet you he peeks into my room when I’m not there, lays his big old body on the floor of my room with his hand to heart, and belts out “Please, Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want” when no one is home. And that’s what the DJ did, brought his hand to his heart and said, “I love Moz.” And he let me look through the list of songs. I took the DJ’s lead. I picked the song I felt I should sing because my heart told me to. You know when you listen to your heart it actually feels like a tug? I chose, “Tomorrow.”

I felt fine until I got on the stage. I was alone and looked at the crowd. The one stage light shone bright in my face. I broke out into a sweat. Felt the beads slide down my
back. The DJ said my name and the song I was singing. Then the song started. I wasn’t ready yet, I thought. I grabbed the mic, took it from the stand, and held it up to my mouth. The first word, “tomorrow” came out in a whisper. And I immediately knew people were laughing at me. Someone shouted something. My mouth kept moving and it was like I didn’t have a voice. And I asked myself, What happened to that strange feeling when I decided to do this in the first place? I put the mic back on the stand and put my arms around my body. I closed my eyes and pictured the light of the stage getting even brighter, hotter, covering me, going inside of me. I imagined the light shooting out of my eyes and my mouth when I opened them and it felt like my heart was on fire when I sang to the crowd to tell me that they loved me. I pictured all of the light covering the crowd like a blanket, infusing them all with the spirit of Morrissey. And then, I was real into it, Angela. I wish you could have seen me. I sang like one of those sexy ladies in bars, like all husky or whatever. Since I was feeling real sincere in that moment, I let myself dance, because I wanted to, and I didn’t care how silly it was. I danced the tarantella dance; the only dance I know. My dad taught it to me once when I was little. We were at his co-workers wedding and my dad was really drunk. I hopped on one foot and brought my other leg to the right and then to the left, like I was sweeping the floor. I held my hands out and snapped my fingers. And when someone in the crowd yelled, “What the hell are you doing?” I kept dancing, because soon the song would end. And then I heard someone say, “I fucking love you.” I didn’t even try to see who it was. To figure out if it was real or making fun of me. I just accepted it. And let bubbling feeling keep spilling out of me. The thing I’d been holding in this whole time. I finally let it go.
Did I ever tell you Angela? How I found Morrissey? I couldn’t sleep one night, so, finally, I gave up and went into the living room to watch TV. That’s when I saw his video on MTV “The More You Ignore Me, The Closer I Get.” I know…MTV is like the least cool way to find out things. But this is just me talking to you so I’m being honest. I had never heard a voice like his before. I think your description was a good one, Angela. It’s like water and it’s very soothing. I remember thinking the lamps in the hallway in the video looked like small UFOs, and Moz was in command of them every time he tapped them with his hands. I have never seen anyone who looks like him. That smirk, devilish but handsome, like how the shadows seemed to just pool into his eyes. Is he in your timeline Angela? I can’t even believe I’m asking this. But in your world, when all’s left is California after the quake, does Morrissey still exist?

Remember when we bought the bootleg VHS of the Smiths? The footage was fuzzy. It was a live band with a crowd around it of teased 80s hair. There was a man on the screen strumming a guitar. Then the camera went right to Moz in a loose silk shirt. He wore a necklace that looked like chains twisted around many dark stones, his hair in a quiff, hips swaying like a girly Elvis, arms rippling in the air like he was enclosed in water, and in his back pocket was a wilted bouquet of daffodils he shook like a tail. We watched him sing and almost collapse to the floor in one graceful move. I sucked in my breath when he clasped his hands together like a prayer. His lips looked like they wanted
to kiss, and the corners were up in a mischievous way. You said he was beautiful, Angela. And I agreed. You didn’t make a big deal out of it; that I like guys.

Last night was the best sleep I ever had. It seems so simple, but I just copied Morrissey from the video. I hugged myself, and it was all I needed to get myself to sleep. It was like being cold, no matter how many times you try to jump up and down, and the only thing going to warm you up is being all wrapped up in a blanket. I didn’t need the dog, your hand on the other side of the wall, the air freshener that reminded me of Felix, or even Petra’s squishy body, all I needed was myself. I closed my eyes and saw Morrissey’s face. I imagined running my fingertips on the corners of his mouth, his ears, his chin, his chest, like feeling silk. I imagined us falling in love and dying in a car crash, staring into each other eyes until the lights went out in our bodies and we were just bodies of light floating in the galaxies. Just like in his song. I felt a calm tugging at my heart. Like an invisible wave of Morrissey’s energy enter my body. It’s like when you go swimming all day and finally go to sleep at night. You lie in your bed and still feel like you’re floating in water. This is what it feels like: love. And I can get it all by myself. No one has to be there.

I rocked myself to sleep with Moz’s love and had the wildest dream. I haven’t eaten meat since I found him and I feel fine. I feel lighter actually. And in my dream the spirits of all the animals I have eaten in the past have stopped following me and moved onto their peace. I was in a Heaven only for animals and the humans who truly loved them. It’s like that picture of the lion lying with the lamb in bible storybooks, before the fall of paradise. There was a courtyard and a statue of Morrissey in the middle of it. His
arms were open wide. Sparrows drank from the rainwater collected in his cupped hands. And then I saw you, Angela, and Felix, two cats, on two legs, holding hands, with your tails arching over your heads in the shape of a heart. All of my want, my need, of Felix left me, because how could I want you guys to be apart? In your gold, and his green cat eyes, I saw all of the particles of what makes us, like dust from the stars, and the recognition that what the two of you have in each other is something I don’t understand. But I will, I know it will happen someday, just like you said. And because I actually love you, and love Felix, I want you two to be happy. I don’t know Angela, was it just a dream? Is all this stuff you told me on your tape true? I want to believe it, but I need proof.

Petra came to my window finally. She had Felix’s clothes folded all up in a big shopping bag. I added your clothes to the bag and we left it in the corner of my room. The two of us cuddled in my bed and stared at each other. “I’m having dreams now too,” I told Petra. She looked up at me and her eyes became half moons and she smashed her face into my armpit. I told her about the dream and of course she said it wasn’t a dream. “I’m going to teach you something,” she said. I said, “What?” but she shushed me and told me to just lay there with my eyes closed. She put one hand on the top of my head and the other on my chest, over my heart. “Roll your eyes up to the middle of your forehead,” she told me. “Huh?” I said. “Just do it.” So I did it. And it felt like my eyes were going to get stuck. I kept trying to sit up, but Petra kept pushing me back down. Eventually I did start to see. I saw the bonfire you talked about. I saw you and Felix as your cat alien selves. Saw your family. Then I saw you and Felix flying in the galaxy in a space ship. I
couldn’t get over the colors: pinks, purples, reds, all swirling and speckled against the black background of space. And you were flying to this big blue planet. I didn’t get it until you guys were super close, that it was Earth covered in water. And then I sat up, eyes wide, covered in sweat. Petra was staring at me like I turned into an alien myself. The room was dark. “How long was I out?” I asked. “A while,” she said.

Petra “channeled” next and she said she saw you and Felix purposefully putting your guys’ clothes all over Pedro to mess with us. You didn’t say this on the tape. You created a mystery to push us to believe in magic again. It was sneaky, Angela, but it worked. Petra’s eyes fluttered in her head and I wondered if she was going to start fluttering to the ceiling. “How did you know how to do this?” I asked her when she was done. “I don’t know. I just always knew, I guess,” was what she said. She sat with her legs crossed on my bed, her hair tied up in a bun on top of her head, she was wearing her own jacket now, not Felix’s, a red and pink flannel. She took off her flannel and handed it to me. It was soft and I brought it to my face and smelled it. It smelled like weed and cigarettes and lavender perfume. “Why are you giving me this? You disappearing too?” Then her chin started shaking, the tears rolled down her face, and dripped onto my bed sheets. “Why?” I whispered. “We’re moving to Vegas. It’s cheaper to live there,” she said. And I pulled her towards me. I kissed her on the cheek. She tried to put her tongue in my mouth again, I moved my face out of the way, but I still held her and didn’t let her go while she cried into my chest. She asked me to make a copy of this tape. You on Side A and me on Side B. To mail it to her when she’s in Vegas. So she’ll always feel a part of
home with her. I promised her and I gave her my “Meat is Murder” shirt. She promised not to eat meat anymore... just for me.

In the morning Petra left me a note:

Iggy,

Last night I dreamt I was old, like in my thirties. I was in a forest like the one Angela talks about on her tape. I was looking at all of the stars in the sky and I kept wishing over and over you could love me the way I want you to. And the sky spoke to me in my dream. It told me you would never be able to. It said if I ever wanted to find someone, I had to love myself first. I don’t know how I’m going to do it, Iggy, but after being friends with you, it has definitely pushed me to go out and try. I don’t care how long it takes. I’m going to do it. For myself. So thank you for being in my life. You’ve changed it.

Love, Petra

And I realized Felix had done the same thing for me. And I learned how, Angela. I learned it so fast. I hope Petra can too.

At night, I lay in my bed. I imagine I’m in Heaven with the statue of Morrissey and all of the animals. There’s a big white light like the sun above us. Shining on us. I gather up all of the light with my hands and throw it on my duplex, on Lassie, our Abuelos, my mom and my dad, the whole duplex. I make the light travel to Las Vegas and creep its way inside of Petra’s heart. I watch as the light flies through the galaxy, finds you and Felix, and because you’re both aliens, you know exactly what I’m doing. And then sometimes I see the light covering the entire planet until the planet itself is like
one big disco ball. And everyone in the galaxy sees it and thinks about what beautiful place Earth is, the people there, and their lives.
It’s summer now. My dad came to my room early this morning. His large frame a shadow in the doorway. He wore his hardhat and held a small ice chest in his hand. He tried to whisper to me, but his voice is too deep. He asked me if I was coming with him or not. I was going to make him late. My bed was warm, it was early, I told him next time. He sighed and closed the door. Inside, I knew I would never go to work with him if I could help it. The docks were this mysterious place where the men in my family stood on ships, lifted heavy containers with cranes and sweated in the hot sun.

My mother slept till noon. The last time I remember her waking up in the morning was before your mom died. She made me pancakes that looked like Mickey Mouse, a round head with two ears. She made the eyes from two over easy eggs and the mouth from two layered strips of bacon. I didn’t know better at that age to not eat animals.

I have a picture of her and my Tía. I keep it underneath my bed. They are side by side. My mother, a head elevated from my Tía, both wearing their ballet leotards, the tutu puffing up at the bottom of the picture. The back of the photo says: años 16 y 17. They both have their hair pulled back into a bun, chins high, and smirked with their eyes. My mother’s eyes were proud. There was expression in them. During our losses, her brown eyes looked brighter, like the light behind them was turned on too high. In between the losses, that’s when the light is small, like the blue pilot light in our stove.

I wanted to go back to sleep, but then the sun came. I ate a banana, brushed my teeth, washed my face, watched a bit of the morning news at a low volume. I muted the
TV and read part of the Oscar Wilde poetry book I had checked out from the library when my mother’s bedroom door opened. She walked down the hallway and into my room. I should have told her I was here, in the living room, but I just didn’t care enough. I kept reading and then I heard her in my room, messing with my stuff. I put the book down on the coffee table and walked as slow, and as quiet as I could.

I peeked at her from the doorway. She faced the window, her back to me, the blinds open letting the sunlight into the room. She’d turned on my record player and started, “Now My Heart Is Full.” She was wearing an oversized sweater and leggings from the 80s. Her head was bowed, her body swayed, her arms hung limp. She swayed faster when the music picked up, her right arm arched over her head, her left arm out to the side. Her leg kicked out and she spun herself into a dance. I don’t know the terms in ballet, but I think she was a prima ballerina. As she danced inside my room, her body absorbed the sunlight. Her skin was dried and sallow, warmed and brightened, and for a moment, when Morrissey sang about an unexplainable full heart, she glowed.

The song ended and I didn’t want her to see me spying, so I quickly made my way back to the couch and picked up my book. I heard her take the needle off the record, the click of the knob, the static on the speakers stopped. “Oh,” she said, “Iggy.” I looked up and said good morning. I told her I wasn’t feeling well and decided to stay home. She smiled at me, her eyes with that look of “yeah right, you just didn’t want to go.” I stuck my face back in my book, unable to control my tears as she clanged pots and pans in the kitchen.
“It’s late,” she said, “But you want breakfast?” I squeaked out a yes. The words in my book made no sense. I smelled eggs, I smelled bacon, toast, I smelled toast! When it was ready I sat at the table with her. She was already eating the bacon, greasy on the paper towel. She told me to eat. I picked up a piece of toast and put strawberry jam on it. “No butter?” she asked. I shook my head, “I don’t eat animal products.” She shook hot sauce on her eggs. “No butter?” She laughed, and I shook my head again. “Dad knows this?” I told her he thinks I’m not interested in food. She shrugged. “If it’s what you want.” After my one piece of toast, I sipped some orange juice, and even though I didn’t approve of the flesh and dairy she ate, I couldn’t walk away while she ate her plate and then mine.

She put the dishes in the sink, told me she was going to take a shower and then kissed me on the forehead. I opened the blinds over the kitchen sink window and let in the sun’s rays. Each ray had tiny particles of dust, impossible to count. I washed the dishes with hot water and soap, the bubbles holding in swirly rainbow colors. My mother came up behind me wrapped in a towel, her hair wet. “Let me,” she said. I told her I wanted to do it. She scooped up a handful of soapsuds and stuck it on her chin. “Look, I got a beard,” she laughed. She collected the bubbles back into her hands and blew it into smaller pieces that floated back down into the sink. I wanted to hug her, and tell her I missed her and that I loved her so much, but I didn’t want to break this spell.
Blair and I lie belly down on the matted carpet, and close our eyes. No curtain hangs above the glass door to the balcony; the moonlight pours into the room and onto our faces. I open one eye to look at him, and he is looking at me with one eye. We giggle. This room, above all the rooms of our friend Tristan’s house, has no furniture. We’ve been staying here for a week now, runaways, haven’t even been to school either. Tristan’s mother, Margaret, hasn’t said anything, but she’s never home. We can’t sleep, so we get up. I want to get drunk, I say. I have ten bucks left, he tells me. Let’s go fishing.

We tiptoe in our socks down the stairs. Tristan’s breath whistles from his retainer. The sound leaks through the open door of his room. I’m at the entryway putting on my boots when the freezer door cracks open. Blair is stealing Margaret’s cigarettes from the carton. I double loop the laces of my Doc Martens. We put on our hoodies and leave the house.

We throw the hoods of our jackets on and pull the strings tight around our faces. Blair smacks one end of the pack against his palm to push all of the tobacco against the cigarettes’ filters. I never understood this. I guess it tastes better that way? My nose drips, and I wipe it with the sleeve of my jacket. Nasty, Blair says. I rub it on his shoulder.

We sit outside next to a pay phone at the liquor store. We drag on our cold cigarettes; the smoke spills out of our mouths like fog. Blair stares out at the street. I stare at the pavement speckled with black gum spots. We wait for a fish. It’s dead on Tuesday nights.
Blair stands and picks up the pay phone. I ask him who he’s calling. He giggles as he dials. He tells me to come closer, that it’s free. I get up, and then stand next to him. Our hoods are off, and we press our ears together over the phone’s speaker. The ears that each have a beauty spot on the lobe. His on the right; mine on the left. He was the one who noticed it. He said it meant that we were twins. Sometimes we tell people that we’re brother and sister.

The woman on the phone sighs for a name. Blair cups his hand over his mouth to make his voice sound deeper. He tells her my name and that he likes anal. She says she likes it too. I try not to giggle, but I do, and then the woman hangs up. Blair puts the phone back on the hook, and I slap his shoulder for giving her my name.

A car pulls up; it’s a woman in her mid-thirties with her hair tied up in a knot. Her plaid pajama bottoms peek out beneath a large coat. I whisper to Blair, ask her. No, he says, women never do it. I feel the question stick in my throat as she walks past us and into the store. Fuck, I say, we’re gonna be here all night.

But he arrives. Our fish. A middle-aged man with rough skin wearing dirty jeans. He smiles at me. I pull at the hem of my dress. I know how I look to him, the red lipstick, the cat collar, and the fishnet tights. But my hoodie shows I’m still a kid. This is when I act like Blair is my boyfriend, throwing my arm around him. Blair—with his bleached-to-white hair and smudged eyeliner—sighs, letting my arm rest on him. I ask the man to buy us beer. I say it like I’m asking him the time and he says sure. Blair tells him Mickey’s as he slides him the ten-dollar bill. The man laughs, kid’s beer…okay.
After a few minutes, the guy comes out cradling a bag with clinking bottles. We follow him around to the side of the store as he puts the forties behind a bush. He asks us if we want to drink in his car, that he could take us somewhere where we wouldn’t get caught. We giggle, no. He salutes us, okay. He gets into his car, then drives off. Who the fuck salutes people? Blair says. I laugh. We pick up the bottles in their paper bags, zip them up inside our hoodies, and walk.

On our way back, Blair tells me he doesn’t want to sleep until the sun comes up. He looks far ahead of us when he says this, so far into the distance that it’s like he is looking past the street, the houses, the trees, the light posts, and the sky. I can read your tarot cards again, I say. He nods. His loneliness sits on my chest. It’s been seven days since he last spoke to his mother. I try to find my loneliness, but it’s a dull hum.

And that’s when I see it, the aircraft that looks like a molten rock, hovering over the rooftops of the neighborhood. I point. UFO, Blair whispers. I feel the pilot see me looking at it. For that second, my mind and its mind merge into one, like sinking a sore foot into hot water; like the warmth of home. Not supposed to see me, it thinks. The ship speeds up, creating a tail of colors as it turns into the sky, as if the sky were a curtain that it could slip through, and disappears.

Back at Tristan’s, the only sound is the fridge’s hum from downstairs. We screw the caps off of our Mickey’s. Show each other the rebus puzzles: “shoot for the stars” and “be a rock star.” We open the patio door so that we can smoke. The beer coats my insides. I relax against the doorframe. Blair stares at the sky, and I see all of his loneliness in my mind’s eye:
Blair and Krystal have been going out for three days and haven’t kissed yet. They walk through the quiet neighborhood as the stars begin to peek out. I want you to meet Tristan, she says. He gazes at the small bump of her breasts and two Xs of black tape over her nipples peeking from the top of her white tank. He grabs her hand, the nails painted black. She smirks and squeezes back. They stop at a two-story house. He looks up at the balcony on the second floor and rubs his eyes; his new contacts are scratchy and all he sees is the silhouette of a boy with shoulder length hair. The tip of Tristan’s cigarette glows in the dark like a firefly. The door’s unlocked, he says in a wispy voice. Blair repeats the phrase in his head like a line from a song as he and Krystal enter the house and make their way upstairs.

The room is empty save for a boom box and a backpack leaning up against a wall. The carpet is littered with dried cat shit. The smell mixes with the cigarette smoke floating in from outside. Gross, he whispers to Krystal. Just be careful, she whispers back. They join Tristan on the open balcony. Krystal leans her back on the metal railing and lights up a cigarette. Tristan’s hair is blue and parted down the middle, reaching past his ears. He’s wearing a jean jacket with metal studs on the shoulders. On the back is a sewn-on Ministry patch. Blair twists the hem of his shirt that he turned inside out in the bathroom during P.E. because some kid with bleached-tipped hair asked if the Pink G logo stood for gay. Smoke puff s out Tristan’s mouth and hovers above him like a cloud when he introduces himself. Blair can’t tell if it’s the florescent bulb dangling from the ceiling in the room, or the flickering street lamp, or the light polluted stars, but there’s a brightness behind Tristan’s hazel eyes that Blair had never seen before and he stares into
them a little too long as he lights up a cigarette. He blows out a stream of smoke. Blair, he says. Krystal hooks her arm in his. Blair and I are going out, she says. Tristan smiles as he brings the cigarette to his lips and inhales, his fingers flex out into a V. That’s cute, he sings.

Inside, the three of them sit on the clean parts of the floor. From the backpack leaning up against the wall, Tristan pulls out a pipe and a plastic bag half full of, what Blair reasons, is weed, though he thinks it looks more like clumped together moss. You’ve never been high before have you? he asks Blair as he pinches a bit of the herb with his thumb and forefinger. He then packs it into the pipe’s brass bowl. Blair chuckles. You don’t know my stories, he says and wags a finger. You don’t know my life.

The first hit makes Blair cough. The burn fills his lungs. He didn’t realize how large his lungs were, how much space they take up in his body. By the fourth hit, he stands up and kicks at the turds on the floor. By the eighth hit, he yells at Tristan to clean his room. Both of his friends lie on the floor and laugh. Blair collapses into the crook of Krystal’s arm. He stares at her black mouth and touches the mole on her upper lip with his index finger. Kiss me, he tells her. She straddles him, her breath hot on his face, her bangs in a braid that she tucks behind her ear, falls onto his cheek. She flicks her tongue inside his mouth and tastes it like warm milk.

Tristan leans on one arm and runs his other hand through his hair. Krystal takes another hit from the pipe. She leans towards Tristan, their lips touch, and smoke spills out of the space between their mouths. He sits up, his mouth holding smoke, and approaches
Blair. There’s a strand of blue hair stuck on his lips. Blair presses his mouth against his.
The lip-gloss tastes like apple and he moans, leaking out puffs of smoke.

Nine Inch Nails plays on a boom box on the floor. There’s a short in the speaker
wires and every so often the left speaker shuts off and the guitars and chorus are lost.

Tristan jiggles the volume button until the sound pops and crackles into the full depth of
the song. Krystal eyes him as he does this. He sings to the chorus, husky, runs his hand
through his blue hair, and lets it fall into place. Blair licks his lips, still tasting the apple
gloss, and he wishes he could play shotgun again, but he’s so high right now that his
temples are throbbing.

Blair places his hand on Krystal’s thigh. There’s a hole in her fishnet stockings
and in the center of that hole is a scab, a cut wide enough so that the two halves of the
wound struggle to meet each other. Her profile is to him, and Blair sees a darkness in her
face, now that it’s lax, marionette lines around her mouth and he wonders what had
happened to her.

The song on the CD ends and in the break of silence before the next track, a tiny
mew from the cat is heard at the top of the staircase. Learn how to use the litter box! Blair
yells at the black cat. Tristan spreads his arms out, Isis! She prances over to him and rubs
her head on his hand. You don’t choose who you love, he says. Krystal snorts. Blair feels
a warmth in his chest that spreads out to his shoulders and down his legs. He thinks,

Tristan is right.
Blair

Mr. Salazar sits at the front of the classroom with a book in his lap. He’s not smiling like he normally does. We shuffle into our seats as we ooh and awe at the decorations. Broken hearts cut out of blue construction paper line the walls. Strings of white Christmas lights are stapled to the bulletin boards. The bell dings and fourth period starts. Blair sits in front of me and whispers, He got issues. And I giggle with him. That’s when Mr. Salazar opens the book, clears his throat. The only lines by Frank O’Hara that we grab onto are about brushing hair and crying in a bathtub.

The rest of the poem comes out of our teacher’s mouth like a hum that mirrors the pulse of the lights in the room. Blair’s posture is straight for once. I stare at the back of his head, his blonde hair longer in the front, inspired by T-Boz. He’s wearing his Garbage shirt today, the band’s logo a pink G. If I can guess his thoughts, the poem is shortened even more to “Who am I?” Mr. Salazar finishes reading and closes the book. We expect him to spread his arms, to cite Shakespeare loud from deep within, but he doesn’t. His silk shirt with the billowing sleeves gets no use today. He walks out of the room even though there is forty-five minutes left of class. While everyone is giggling and saying to each other that he’s a teacher who is trying too hard, Blair removes his glasses and wipes them with the end of his shirt and rubs his eyes before he puts them back on.

For every period, Blair chooses his seat in the middle of the row closest to the wall. He stares into the blank space. While in history class, his teacher’s voice muffles into that Charlie Brown wah wah wah. He thinks about his name, Blair, the place where
his father was born and the place where his father went back to without him. He worries about his hands, how they always seem to position themselves palms up, exposing the slenderness of his fingers. It’s always his hands that other kids look at first, and then sneer right before they call him a faggot. Every time the word shoots into him, a piece of it lodges into his chest after he pulls it out.

The bell dings. History is over and no one has called him anything yet. He slips his backpack on. It’s light, just a notebook of drawings, mostly of Buffy. She’s a TV character, a blonde high-school girl with superhuman strength that she uses to slay vampires. Someone pulls on the strap of his backpack. At first he thinks it’s me, but when he turns around it’s Chris. And he pushes Blair up against a locker, the combination dial digs into his shoulder.

In Chris’ gelled hair, Blair can see about five balls of fuzz. You’re going to hell, he tells him. Chris presses his thumbnails into Blair’s forearms. You can’t move. I got you. And no one cares. Blair closes his eyes and thinks about Buffy. Her school is on top of a Hellmouth, a portal where demons spring from to wreak havoc, a signifier that High School is Hell. With this realization, Blair asks himself, what would Buffy do? Well, she’d start with a one-liner. He looks this demon right in the eye and says, I’ll see you there, bitch. Then, like a cat, licks Chris’ closed mouth.

It’s lunch hour and Blair and me are sitting on power boxes across the street from school. The fan inside of the metal box hums, working on someone’s AC inside the apartment building nearby. Our foreheads glisten in the Vegas heat. We eat hot fries and
drink Dr. Pepper. We share a cigarette and shape the end of it on the stucco wall, leaving one out of many smudges.

I have something to tell you, he says. I know it’s important because he’s looking down at his Docs. I tell him it’s okay. Me and Tristan, he breathes, we’re kinda goin’ out. I picture the two of them holding hands. We kiss, he says. And because I can never control my face, my hand goes right to my mouth and my eyes widen. See, I knew it, he says. And I say no, no, no to assure him that I’m still his friend. I touch his shoulder. I’m dumb, I say. The longer pieces of his hair catch onto his mouth. I asked him if he told his mom yet and he shakes his head. I don’t want to see the disgust on her face, he says, with an emphasis on her.

Looking at his bleached white hair, the smudges of black eyeliner, his ripped up black jeans wide enough to create the silhouette of a dress, I didn’t understand how his mother could not know. I didn’t understand why I acted surprised. Perhaps it was a shock that he had admitted it out loud. It had only been a month ago that he clearly pretended to be in love with his TV Hero Buffy, rather than her brooding vampire boyfriend Angel. We finish our cigarette right when the bike cop rolls by and tells us to get to campus before the bell rings. She follows us from behind, riding her bike slowly, the chain in the wheels clicking, staring us down through her sunglasses. “Ugly bitch,” Blair whispers to me. I giggle.

Tristan’s hair is blue and parted down the middle, reaching past his ears. He smiles without showing his teeth. He and Blair sit on the lawn right in front of a youth
mental health facility that looks just like all of the other peach stucco Spanish-style buildings in Vegas. Tristan brings the cigarette to his lips and when he inhales, his fingers flex out into a V. He leans towards Blair, their lips touch, the smoke spills out of the space between their mouths.

Cars zip down Western Boulevard, but there are no pedestrians on the sidewalk, and no commuters waiting for the bus. Hedges shield the two boys as they both grab the backs of each other’s heads like in the movies. Tristan’s lip-gloss tastes like apple and Blair moans, Mmm. Their kiss ends with the sound of a smack. I want to give you something, Tristan says. His voice is husky and the green of his eyes sharpen. The blue sky pales to white. The cars are all that Blair can hear next to his pounding heart. Not here, he tells Tristan. Not in the open like this. Tristan looks towards the public bathroom. The world syncs back to normal, nerves gone. Blair narrows his eyes at him. You want my first time to be where people shit? I cannot believe you! He gets ups, Tristan tells him to wait, but Blair is swinging his arms and practically stomping to the bus stop.

He crosses his arms once he sits and turns away from Tristan who sits right next to him, telling him that he’s sorry. B, he says, look at me. But Blair keeps his gaze on the street as if he is looking for the bus. Grabbing his hand and then leaning his head on Blair’s shoulder, Tristan tells him that he didn’t know that he had never done it before. Tristan sniffs and Blair pats his head with his free hand.

Outside the sun is setting into a pinkish hue. The cold hits Blair’s face and his nose starts running. Pulling on the strings of his hoodie, he walks over to the bus route
that goes into the direction of my place. Bouncing his legs to keep warm, he thinks about
the lover’s box he made with Tristan and how it’s gone now because his mother’s
Christian boyfriend found it and threw it out.

1. An entwined lock of his and Tristan’s hair.

2. A repeated recording of the song “Milk” by Garbage on a sixty minute tape.

3. A strip of photos from a booth.

4. A picture that Blair drew of himself and Tristan posed as Buffy and Angel.

5. A conversation about Buffy that they had written on index cards.

My bedroom window is on the second floor and I had removed the screen so that
the smoke from my cigarettes gets more circulation. I also like to look out at the sky.
Because the city has so many lights, the stars are faint, but I still like to try and find them.

I hear someone hiss, Hey. I look down and it’s Blair hugging himself in his
hoodie. “What the fuck are you doing here? I ask. I got into a fight with my stupid bitch
stepdad, he says and then asks me if he can come up and I know that if he came up the
stairs to my apartment that there would be no way that my mother and her boyfriend
Walsh wouldn’t hear me open the door.

I look around my room as if a rope would be there. In my closet are a few folded
sheets. Just like in the movies, I tie them together as tight as I can. Like Rapunzel, I let
down my cascade of pink cotton and tie the last piece on my end to the bedpost. Blair
grabs onto the sheet with both hands, places his feet on the side of the building and pull-
walks his way up. As I’m waiting for him to crawl through my window, I decide to play a
CD. As I lean towards my boom box, I hear a zip followed by a boom. I look down, and
there is Blair groaning in the bushes. I whisper-yell oh my god. He asks me if he can just use the door.

I meet him at the door. His nose has red crusts of blood. I whisper oh my god again and he shoos me out of the way. I close the door slowly, listening and waiting for the rise and fall of my mom and Walsh’s snoring to break, but it doesn’t. Blair and I run on our toes to my room. Once we’re inside, with the door shut, I make him a bed out of extra comforters in the closet, as he tells me what happened. It’s after midnight and we’ve both got school in the morning. I close the closet door, turn off the bedroom light and we both drift into sleep.
The last concert Madison went to was in ’95. It was David Bowie and Nine Inch Nails. Her father wouldn’t let her and her brother go to the floor because they were too young: fourteen and twelve. The three of them sat in cramped stadium seats. She watched the slick sweat run down Trent Reznor’s arms. His black hair stuck to the sides of his face. I’m in the same room as him, she thought. She wasn’t much of a mosher and the thought never appealed to her, how it moved in circles like a swarm, like a bunch of drones but she did envy the people in the pit. If she were down there, then she’d be closer to Trent.

She pretended that her younger brother wasn’t head-banging like a dork. That she didn’t know the old guy, her father, tapping his fingers on his knee. Yes, she cried during “Hurt,” even though at that point she didn’t even know what she was hurt about. On the ride home, her dad asked them if they had fun. Madison mumbled a yeah right before she fell asleep to the ringing in her ears.

Now she’s standing up against the barricade to the stage at the Joint waiting for Marilyn Manson to come on. All of her friends are right beside her in a row. Manson isn’t industrial, but Reznor endorses him so…so does she. She dyed her hair black earlier that evening. Put on fishnet stockings and her Docs. Wore a simple black dress with a vinyl choker and a bullet charm. It took her four hours to perfectly shape her bangs. She was a Rivethead, not a Mall Goth, band-t-shirt-wearing, and lunch-boxes-with-stickers-holding

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poser. Plus, she was an adult already, or at least that’s how she felt since her size C breasts were being smashed up against the railing. When is this thing gonna start already? she asked her friend, Petra. Petra with the bright red hair and no boobs who looked fine at the barricade with her arms dangling over it like a bored kid.

The new guy in her circle of friends, Blair, was holding Krystal. Tristan stood next to them with his hands in his jean jacket pockets and he kept flipping his fading blue hair like he was bored and didn’t really want to be there. He wore a Thrill Kill Kult T-shirt because only dorks wear the band shirt of the band that they are going to go see. Everyone knows that, even Madison, though she would never be caught dead in a band shirt.

The lights dimmed, the fog rolled out onto the stage, and the sound of a Manson speaking on a voice box played out onto the crowd like a gurgling creature. And the crowd all started pushing towards the stage. Madison felt the warm squishy body of an overweight older woman behind her. She turned around to see that the woman had painted a bright red bar across her eyes and smeared on white face makeup. “Sorry,” the woman said to her. Madison felt all of the woman’s insecurities leak all over her.

Manson came out, his hair in wet tangles, his body wrapped in medical gauze and a straight jacket. Ginger’s green faux hawk barely visible from behind his drums. Pogo at the keyboards adorned like a church organ. Twiggy in his 60s dress and dreadlocks. And her personal favorite, Zim-Zum, in tight black shorts and pin-up stockings. She took it all in for the first song because she knew she wasn’t going to be able to last the whole
concert with the large woman behind her. The pain in her chest from the barricade would certainly cause bruising. Maybe she would have stayed if it were NIN.

Madison turned around. Move, she said. She ordered the woman in the bad clown makeup. And she pushed herself through the crowd until she got to the edge of the mosh pit. Relief set in as she got a whiff of cool air and breathed through her nose. She’d never moshed before. She went to many concerts after the first one her dad had taken her and her brother to. But she never tried it because it was always full of guys jumping around with their shirts off like a bunch of apes. She didn’t care in this moment. Hell, she thought, I could probably take on most of these creeps if any of them tried to grab me. Mostly what she saw were a few boys with crusty devil locks, and maybe only a few really big guys with their shirts off.

Fuck it, she said out loud. And ran into the pit. At first it just felt like she was running laps. And then someone would bump into her. Watching how the other guys did it, she just pushed them with both hands, palms on the flattest body surface she could find. Adrenaline ran through her body and she ran faster, stomped her feet harder, and pushed anyone that came near her.

Until she zeroed in on one guy that looked really pathetic. The kid flopped around like a drunk fish. Push him. And so she did. Over and over she’d target the kid with the dirty blonde hair and black lipstick. She glared at his stupid striped sock hand gloves he had made. And it made her feel powerful. Until the kid figured it out and looked up at her. And the two of them stopped right in the middle of the pit. Stop it! he said. Leave me alone! And Madison tried to mouth out the words: I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m doing
this. But at that point the kid was already gone. And Madison was standing in the middle of the pit, a swarm of kids in band shirts and Halloween makeup circling around her. She didn’t know how to get out.
Halloween

Dear Diary,

On Halloween my elementary school always had a fair. It was my favorite thing. Mainly because of the food. I always got a pickle and then later a snow cone. Even though it was cold as hell. Well, as cold as it gets in Southern California. I liked bubblegum snow cones and always thought it was funny that they were blue. You think of bubblegum and you think of pink. It's like if you looked at your lawn and the grass was purple for one day.

Every year I wore my ratty cat costume which consisted of a head band with pink ears, a tail sewed on the back of a belt, and whatever black T-shirt and pants I could find. That year I didn’t even bother putting on the cat make-up. I just woke up in the morning thinking about blue snow scones and pickles.

In class, none of us could pay attention to our lessons. The kids whose parents were in longshoring always had the best costumes. There was a girl in my class who wore a red wig and a mermaid’s tail. She got it form the Disney store. Her name was Heather and her hair was really blonde. Not like my mousey brown hair. She was thin and teased her hair like all the popular girls. Her mom let her wear maroon lipstick. All the boys liked her. I hated her. In fact, when I think about her now, I still hate her.

I always felt real sorry for them, the poor kids. They’d look at everyone’s costumes and you could tell they wanted one. Their mouths in a flat line, and their eyes all frowning. The school had the teachers take an hour every Halloween to make masks out of paper. The poor kids would have a paper mask that they colored, a witch, a ghost,
Dracula or Frankenstein, and then they would attach a string and wear it. So they could be in the parade. But the thing was, when they walked in the parade, they walked real slow, and their shoulders were hunched, because they hated their paper masks. It was like a parade of showing how poor they were.

After the parade, Me, Tiffany, and Maria stood in a circle on the playground in our costumes. Tiffany won first place. She was a bunch of grapes. All she got was a blue ribbon that said “Number One!” on it. The purple grapes were made out of the stuffing from teddy bears. Her mother knew how to sew. Tiffany was fat so her shape fit the concept.

Maria, because she was one of the richer kids like Heather, she had a costume from the store. She said she was Venus, Goddess of love, and she had on a white toga and fake gold leaves in her hair.

I just chilled in my cat costume with all this pickle juice running down my chin and acted like I didn’t know it. We were all a little disappointed because there wasn’t a haunted house that year. Most years the teachers would make a haunted house in a few classrooms and we’d all go inside with our eyes closed and our mouths screaming.

“I got an idea,” Maria said, “Let’s play a game.”

I asked what game.

She smirked. “La Llorona,” she said.

“Stupid that’s not a game,” Tiffany said.

“Stupid yes it is,” Maria said.

“No, it’s just a story our moms tell us so we don’t have sex,” Tiffany laughed.
“No, it’s a game too, the way you play it is you go into a bathroom okay? And then you turn all the lights off…”

I asked, “How are we gonna play a game when we can’t see? And why in a stinky bathroom? And what’s a La Llorona?”

Maria laughed and mimicked the way I couldn’t roll the R.

Maria said, “Listen, you stand in front of the mirror and then you say La Llorona over and over and then she’s supposed to come up in the mirror…”

“That’s not gonna happen,” Tiffany said.

“Listen!” Maria said. “What’s supposed to happen, when she appears, you’re supposed to ask her a question. Like about the future or whatever. And then, whatever she says is the truth because she’s dead you know?”

“Isn’t that Bloody Mary?” I asked.

“It’s the same thing,” Maria said. “That’s just what you white people call it.”

“Oh,” I said.

I said, “I don't want to do that.” I must have looked real scared. I think I was shaking just a tiny bit.

“Don’t be a pussy,” Tiffany said.

We walked to the 4th grade bathroom, holding hands, and being scared. No one wanted to show it except for me who kept whimpering about why were going down there. It was the bathroom that girls in 4th grade and up were supposed to use but none of them did, because it was scary. It was like a basement under the school, and you had to walk down cement stairs. The inside was something out of a horror movie. The walls were
dirty, dark, and smelled like mildew, and it even had that dripping sound coming from who knows where.

The lights were off but we could still see because there were small windows up top with the shadows people’s feet walking by. We stood in front of a mirror holding hands. Every little while one of us let go to wipe our sweaty palms.

“Okay,” Maria said.

I could tell that she was scared because she breathed her words out longer. She said we had to say her name. She will say it. Then Tiffany will say it with her, and then all three of us.

“How we gotta do it like that?” Tiffany asked.

“Because,” Maria explained, “it has to be in sync or whatever otherwise it won’t work.”

The bathroom went quiet except for the dripping sound. Maria breathed one long breath.

“La Llorona,” she said.

Drip.

“La Llorona,” Maria and Tiffany said.

Drip.

“La Llorona,” I said with them.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The blood ran in my ears. Nothing happened.

“This is dumb,” Tiffany said. Everyone let go of each other’s hands.
“Quiet!” Maria said. “Just wait a minute.”

“I have to pee,” I said.

I told them forget it. Let’s go. Then I couldn’t see.

I looked up toward the little windows and it was like they weren’t even there.

“What the hell guys,” I said.

My heart was beat so fast. I stuck my arms out, reached for them. Tiffany repeatedly said: oh my god over. The drip drip drip sound turned to running water. And then I heard Maria’s scream.

“I can’t feel you!” I said to them.

And then Tiffany cried. Her voice rough, like a boy. It cracked with her fear. And let go. I began to cry, but then I stopped. I breathed told myself that there was no way this La Llorona bitch was going to get a hold of me. I walked towards where I thought the door was, felt for the light switch, and turned it on.

Tiffany hugged herself. Cheeks wet from her tears. Snot on her upper lip.

“Where the hell is Maria?” I asked.

None of the parents let us go out trick or treating the day Maria disappeared. She’d been missing for a month. We were all restless from sitting in the house.

“It hasn’t been long since your friend got kidnapped,” my mother said, “and you and your friends already want to go out?”

“She wasn’t kidnapped,” I said, “La Llorona got her.”

“La Llorona only gets you at the beach at night,” she said, “not in the bathroom mirror at school. That’s Bloody Mary anyway.”
“Same thing,” I said.

My mother watched TV, smoked her cigarettes, always seemed tired. I sat next to her with my toes on. My Velcro wallet in the back pocket of my jeans. I thought about Now or Laters candy. That’s when Tiffany banged on the security door to the house.

“Hey,” Tiffany said. “Lisa?”

I looked at my mother. Begged her with my eyes to let me go.

“Okay,” she said. “But be careful.”

I ran to the door and as me and Tiffany were about to leave, my mother called out for us not to go to the beach.

We walked down 15th street. The streets mostly empty. Any kids our age had their parents with them.

“Let’s go to the beach,” I said.

“No way,” Tiffany said. “We’re supposed to only stay in the neighborhood.”

“I have a funny feeling,” I said. And I did. It was fluttering all around in my chest. That we’d find Maria there.

“Man,” said Tiffany. “I had enough scary things happen to me. I just want some candy from the liquor store.”

We walked in silence. I made sure to keep walking fast and towards the beach that was straight in front of us. I knew Tiffany was worried about Maria, but was trying to stay out of the mess. We didn’t want to get stuck talking to more cops about what happened and having them throw their hands up all mad because they thought we were lying. They couldn’t keep us because we were little.
The long walk to the beach, I thought about Maria’s hair. She always had big curls in them. One time when we were at school, we went to the water fountain and we both, side by side, drank from it. The wind picked up and her hair blew into my face. It smelled like strawberries. It must have been her shampoo. When her hair hit my face I closed my eyes and breathed deep. Her hair felt like feathers. She said sorry to me. And I guess I was looking all weird because she asked me what was wrong with me and she looked uncomfortable wiping the water from her mouth, frowning. Maria had beautiful hair.

We got to the beach. It was dark. Most of the lights in the parking lot and picnic area were out.

“Now what?” Tiffany asked.

She held herself and shivered.

“Let’s get to the water,” I said.

“No,” Tiffany said and she stood still in one place.

“When did you become the pussy?” I said.

Tiffany shook her head. “Let’s go back,” she said.

“But we’re already here,” I said. “If La Llorona did take Maria then she’d be here.”

Tiffany put her hands over her ears.

“Why did I come to your dumb ass house today?” She asked.

I waited for her to calm down before the walk towards the water.

The ocean looked black at night. It would always mess me up looking at it. Like this thing that never ended. This powerful thing, that if one day, if it decided to, it could
swallow us whole. I would always stand there, the water rushing over my feet, taking the sand underneath them away, and I would think about the water becoming a great wave that would take me, the beach, my friends, my mother, my school, my neighborhood, the whole damn world. It would take it all. And there’d be nothing. And the world would be quiet and new again.

The police found Maria wondering down at Cabrillo Beach a couple weeks later. She hadn’t eaten in four days. When they found her she wasn’t crying like *La Llorona* and she didn’t look like she wanted to find anything. She just had this dead stare. Maria stayed in the hospital for about a week. Her mother told all the mothers that she didn’t want anyone bothering her daughter. I didn’t listen.

I went to the hospital and no one said nothing to me. I just walked in there and then I thought maybe I should've pretended to be sick or something. The lady at the desk, was old and had really light pink hair. I didn’t get it. Old ladies were supposed to have white hair. If I wasn’t ditching school, I’d have asked her about her hair, but I just asked where Maria Rosales’s room was.

It ended up being right around the corner on the first floor and when I first saw her lying in that bed, I sort of couldn’t breathe. Her hair was cut really short like a boy. I walked into the room and she didn’t look at me from the TV until I sat on her bed and stared at her hair.

“Why’d you cut your hair,” I asked.

She said, “It got all broken and dead over night.”

She looked very tired like someone bruised her eyes.
“What happened in the bathroom?”

She looked at me. Just a stared.

She said it with no emotions, “My future.”

“What did you look like?” I asked.

She looked away from the TV, at the wall, like the wall helped her talk better.

“I looked like how I look now but older. A lot older,” she said.

I felt sad because she didn’t look good. I wanted to ask her where she went. Did she go through the mirror? Did she enter some weird scary world? A world of nightmares that spit her out at the beach? The questions were resting on my tongue, but I couldn’t get myself to say them. It was like I didn’t want to bother her or something. It was quiet for so long that when she spoke again it didn’t sound real. It sounded like a noise.

“I saw my future,” she said. “In my future I’m bald. I’m old. And I’d sitting in this hospital bed. I smoke lots of cigarettes. I cough a lot.”

“It sounds like now but without the cigarettes,” I said.

She laughed. Her smile weak. She’d accepted some weird fate at the age of ten.

I laid next to her, hoping she’d put her arm around me. Hoping she’d tell me it’s okay, the future, and that it’s gonna be worth it. But she didn’t, she just sat there, cold as a ghost. And really, I just wanted La Llorona to not be true.

I left the hospital and never saw her again. Rumors were that her mother put her in a crazy house. The 4th grade bathroom got locked up. I left elementary school and didn’t think about Maria until now. In the obituary this morning it read: Maria Rosales. Beloved daughter. Died from cancer.
I can’t help but wonder if the vision she had in the mirror was just a warning. For her to change her life so she didn’t end up old and dying of cancer. But it didn’t turn out that way. She died at sixteen and from a different type of cancer probably. And I can’t help but wonder if the vision was just a part of her mind that projected her fears. But because she believed in her fears, she created this, and died sooner.

I sat at the kitchen table this morning. Reading her obituary. Wondering why my mind and Tiffany’s mind didn’t project nothing in that bathroom six years ago. What made Maria’s mind, Maria who was kind of popular and seemed so normal, different from ours? Or did I, and Tiffany, have these weird projections but were just too wimpy to face them?

XOXO Lisa
My mother put me in my bed, pulled the blanket up to my chin and turned the light off. Before she could leave, I asked her, “Since I don’t have a dad, how was I born?” She sat down on the edge of the bed and told me my spirit fell into a watermelon and then into its seed. I imagined everything cold and wet and because of all the sugar around me. I just curled myself up like a shrimp and waited to be born. “It’s where you got your black hair from,” she said. “It’s why your eyes are green. Why your cheeks are so pink.”

All my life I imagined my mother found me at the grocery store. Near the mounds of vegetables and fruits, onions, tomatoes, cabbages, mangos. She went to buy vegetables for a salsa dish for her friend's birthday party, but when she walked up to the chilies, all in a pile, red and green, and she felt the hot taste of them coming up in her throat. A thirst crept up on her, her legs sweated and she felt grains of sand in her mouth. She looked around for the water that comes out to spray the vegetables. But then she saw a round, green, watermelon.

My mother had one of her “funny feelings” if she drank the melon’s juice, she wouldn’t be thirsty anymore. She gripped it with two hands and cracked it onto her knee. It split right down the middle. Two perfect halves. Putting one of the halves back on the fruit display, she cupped her hand and scooped at the insides of the watermelon’s flesh and shoved it into her mouth. The juices ran down her chin to her breasts and pooled inside of her belly button and then slowly dripped down her thighs and between her
sandaled toes. It cleared her thirst even though it was the sweetest thing she’d ever tasted. With every bite she wanted more. She picked up the other half of the watermelon and bit the insides, her cheeks slathered in chunks of fruit. When she was done, she licked each finger and the whole store stared at her and all the pink juices stained her white dress. She left, not knowing a small black seed that held my spirit had settled in at the bottom of her belly.

Every morning my mother noticed her belly get bigger and bigger and she looked at the sky and she stared at the clouds and while she used to see all kinds of things, dresses, flowers and violins, now all she saw were watermelons. At first, when she couldn’t fit into her pair of jeans, she thought she was getting fat, so she tried to eat less. But when her belly grew so big that all she could wear were sundresses, she realized something strange was happening to her.

My mother’s friends at work called her Earth Mother. She had gotten a job being an assistant at an obstetrician’s office. She was in one of the patient rooms, getting it ready, when she felt a tight pain in her stomach. She leaned over, had to put her hand on the counter, but the pain was too much and she fell. She couldn’t scream. It hurt so bad she just laid there with her mouth open. No sound; just tears. The doctor found my mother on the floor, clutching her belly, and he had her carried by nurses up onto the exam table.

The nurses helped my mother out of her t-shirt and stretch pants and into a hospital gown. They noticed, poking out of her belly, a thick green vine about five inches long with one leaf. The doctor didn’t know what to do and just kept staring at it. My
mother howled, “Pull it out!” The doctor grabbed the vine and put one foot on my mother’s belly and pulled hard. My mother screamed with every tug the doctor gave. After a time, the doctor got the nurses to help and they all grabbed hold of the stem. They counted out to three. They pulled and pulled. Slowly, the head of the watermelon emerged and my mother’s belly button stretched to the size of a salad plate. The juices in her sloshed and when the watermelon was finally released it made a POP sound. It was dark green and very round. The doctor passed the fruit to my mother.

My mother kicked the doctor and the nurses out of the room. She rotated the watermelon in her palms and felt a pulse coming from inside of it. It was still slimy from her belly juices. Put it up to her ear, and heard the thump of my heartbeat. Grabbed the scalpel on the tray next to her table and cut all around the melon. She made sure not to go too deep. Palmed each half of the thing and gave it a twist, a sound like pulled apart Velcro. And there, instead of the juicy pink insides of the fruit, I was, covered in sugar water, a baby girl. My mother held me to her chest and named me Melony.

Years later, I found a photo of her and my dad. Shoved in the back of a dresser drawer. My mother was slim. What did she see in my father’s lanky frame? They had their arms around each other like they’d never let go. Both in stone washed jeans and black high top shoes. Written on the back of the photo: “Like magic!” I imagined my mother’s ghost hovering over my shoulder and grunting a reference to Houdini. Blowing out ethereal cigarette smoke into my ear. I stuck the photo inside a book to smooth out the creases over their faces.
Temple of Love

Patricia is a mermaid. Her scales are the size of silver dollars. Her green hair mystically covers her breasts. Water drips from her fin and turns into pearls that she strings with the thread of her hair. Her pinky nail is the needle. She sits on a rock in the middle of the night, waiting for the boats full of men.

Her neck and arms are strung with jewelry. The men come with their pockets full of gold. They want her pearls for their wives because the pearls make them glow.

“It's almost as if my wife were young again,” one sailor said.

So one by one the men come to her rock. She gives them a bracelet, a necklace, or a small ring.

“Love me,” she tells them.

They always kiss her first, right on her peach lips. Their rough hands run over her shoulders, then part her hair.

“Your breasts feel like down pillows,” said one, while he squeezed. “I want to sleep on them.”

And because most of the men stop above the waist, because there is nothing to touch but a slimy tail, they take her pearls to their wives and make love to them.

Patricia listens to the ocean's shhhhh sound. She watches the waves hit the shore and wonders what it's like to have legs. What does sand feel like on toes? But mostly she wonders about the ice cream stand near the pier and the man who runs it.
He is a man in white, smiling when he hands customers a cone. His teeth probably don’t have holes in them like the sailors do, or gold caps, or large spaces in between. She wonders what his mouth tastes like and if it is different from the sailors rotten fish scent. She likes him because his belly pokes out from his shirt and his arms remind her of jelly fish when he thrusts the scoop into the bucket of ice cream. *He seems soft,* she thinks.

Her father is harsh. His hair is silver and his tail is gold. Every color of him is like that of the hard objects that make their way from the human world to the bottom of the sea. Patricia and her three sisters are forbidden to go to the surface because it was the humans who caught their mother, Lucretia, and sold her tail to the fish market. No one ever found her mother’s upper half.

Patricia leaves her rock and splashes back into the ocean, her mind on the ice cream man, her mind on legs. *Humans aren’t all bad,* she thinks. *They’re just like merfolk. Some are and some aren’t.* Instead of going home, near her sisters, near her father, she goes to the sea witch’s cave.

The sea witch’s arms are twisted like dead coral. Her hair fans out like black kelp. She plucks her scales without flinching and plops them into glass bottles and mixes them with the blood of her finger.

“There is always a sacrifice,” the sea witch says. Her lips part in a smile that reveals rows of sharp teeth. “But I like you, so I’ll take from myself.”

Patricia drinks the potion.

“You must dry your tail now.”
Patricia swims up to the surface, to an empty part of the beach. She lies in the sand, the hot sun drying her hair, her skin, her tail. Her scales flake and fall leaving raw flesh. And she feels a sharp pain when her tail rips into two. And she screams while her split fin turns into feet with toes because it feels like someone is carving them with a knife.

She stands and wobbles –nude. Her torso and arms are a deep tan while her legs are pale and blotchy-red. She looks up towards the direction of the pier, sees the man near the ice cream cart and walks towards him. Everyone is staring at her. Parents put their hands over their children’s eyes; fathers stare and mothers too. All look at the naked woman with green hair and the limping walk.

The ice cream man in mid scoop stops to take her in. He sucks in his breath and holds out one strawberry cone. All Patricia ate was seaweed and fish her whole life. She wants to try that ball of pink that sparkles in the sun.

“Give me that,” she says. And she snatches it away.

She winces from the cold as she bites into it. The ice cream man, whose nametag reads Gary, takes off his work shirt and drapes it around her small frame.

“The police are coming to arrest you,” he says.

“What for?” she asks with a ring of pink around her lips.

“Because you’re naked,” he says.

Before she can shrug her shoulders, he brings her behind the cart, behind the bushes into a secluded grassy area with a dome roof of leaves. Patricia chews the cone
until it’s gone; she licks her sticky fingers while he unbuckles his belt and drops his pants.

“Please lie down,” he says.

“Why?” she asks.

“Because I love you,” he says.

She does this because it is what she wanted. He starts poking inside of her. The sweat drips from his face and into her eyes and from her eyes fall pearls and she is surprised by how much of her is still mermaid. His gut presses into her and she can’t breathe. She wants him to stop, she doesn’t like love after all, but his eyes are closed and his mind is in a different world, a floating world; he’s floating inside of her.

When he finishes, she screeches so loud that Gary’s ears bleed and he can no longer hear her or the world around him. She walks him home; his head hung low the whole way because he knows it’s over.

She asks him for his ice cream cart and his uniform and his nametag and he gives it all to her because he had messed things up so badly. He even gives her enough money to stay at a hotel for the week until she can find a place. She leans in and hisses in his ear.

Patricia works the ice cream cart and finds a one-room house nearby. Her white uniform has strawberry, chocolate and mint-chip stains. She wears Gary’s nametag but eats ice cream at least three times a day. Her belly is swollen from the child that constantly kicks her while she eats. Her butt and thighs have thickened so much that no one looks at her anymore and she likes it. She has given up on men loving her and instead
loves her ice cream cart, the ice cream itself, and gazing out onto the ocean. Though, she
does wonder at times where the sailors are at, daydreaming that Gary is in a shack
somewhere starving, and how life is in the sea without her.

After that thought, her sisters’ heads pop up from the water. Patricia walks as fast
as she can down to the beach and meets them there. As she nears them, she notices their
eyes have been plucked, leaving behind red bruises.

“The sea witch,” they tell her. “We went to her.”

“What for?” Patricia asks.

And her eldest sister holds up a conch with all of her sisters’ purple mermaid
blood from when the sea witch took their eyes as payment.

“You can have your tail back, your mermaid life back,” the eldest sister says.

“And we can have our eyes back when you return,” says the youngest.

“She promised us mercy,” says the second eldest.

Patricia clutches her belly and one by one kisses her sisters’ bruises and one by
one they screech and return back to the ocean. The conch rests in the crevice of a rock,
the water swishing around it. Patricia looks up to a flock of birds circling in the sky and
how their wings flap, mimicking the shimmer of fish scales in the sunlight.

Her child is a human. She didn’t think about her child much until then. At first it
was something she didn’t want, making her hungry and sick all the time. But then she
thought about her child’s dreams, because when it dreams they become her own dreams
too and her child often dreams about ice cream. But the dreams have been different
lately: a light shining behind the skin of a mermaid’s purse, illuminating a shadow of
round yoke sucked on by a wiggling merchild. This is what the child wants. This is what Patricia wants.

She picks up the conch. It is heavy in her plump hands. She holds the sharp point of the shell to her lips and lets the thick blood pour into her mouth. The blood burns her tongue like hot soup, sears its way down her throat, and when she glances down at the boiling in her belly, her stomach is flat as if her child had never existed.

Her clothing disintegrates in the air, spurts out like bubbles from gills. The fat in her arms shrinks, leaving two slender limbs. Her hair springs into its loose curls; the green hue is now a bright teal. Raised again are her breasts, no longer stretched towards her belly button. The silhouette of her legs from a distance looks like the sleek tail and full bottom that she once had before coming to the sea witch’s cave.

Standing on one foot, Patricia hovers the other over the ocean water. The waves are small and calm. She takes one last glance at the sun setting over the horizon. The pink, orange, and yellow hues remind her of sorbet and of the nausea that pulled at her every morning when she was pregnant. *I hate ice cream*, she thinks.

To her right is the dock and at the end of it, a ship with billowing sails. A pirate with one good eye spies her with his telescope. Patricia’s body sparkles like the mica in beach sand. He never saw a woman with teal hair before or a body strong and soft in all the right parts. The wind catches her hair and blows it away from her face, her brow is furrowed and the gray of her eyes is like gazing into the crystal ball of a fortuneteller. A vision, the two of them entwined and at the separation of their bodies, his lost eye rises in its socket. He is unsure of this vision and also of the warmth in his chest, if it’s spreading
from the last rays of the days’ sun or if it’s just a feeling, but he projects that feeling out to her, wraps it around her body and pulls her toward his ship.

Patricia steps away from the water. Her body sways from side to side and her feet dance over the still warm sand. The top of her head tingles and spreads throughout her limbs, all the way down to her toes. She follows the feeling until she’s walking down a sun-dried dock, until she’s climbing a rope ladder on the side of a ship, and when she reaches the top, there’s a man with an eye patch and a hook for a hand. He offers her his good hand. Patricia reaches for it; then flinches it back. She stares into his one green eye; it softens. She gives him her hand.

“I’m Captain Andrew,” says the pirate.

“Patricia,” she sings.

They spent a total of six nights making love in the ship’s cabin. On this seventh night, they lie together on red velvet sheets and fur blankets. Patricia traces his scars with her index finger and watches them fade from her touch. He, in turn, plays with her hair with the point of his hook and holds it up to the oil lamp’s light.

“I’m not sure I want my hand back,” he says.

Patricia grips the metal hook with both of her hands and brings it to her chest.

“It does seem like so much a part of you,” she tells him.

His black curly ponytail rests on his shoulder. Sometimes he stares at her for so long that she has to look away. But tonight she’s staring right back, pushing through the heat rising to her cheeks.
“How did you lose these parts of yourself?” she asks.

He looks up at the cabin’s ceiling.

“I used to be a fisherman,” he says. “Until one day I caught a creature with bony arms and shark teeth.”

Captain Andrew rolls his bare body on top of hers.

“She fought hard. Snatched out my eye with one fingernail. Chewed off my hand in one bite.”

His good arm cradles her waist while he hooks the other onto the bedframe. She tries not to think about the ghostly image of the sea witch.

“I think she was some nightmarish form of mermaid. I tossed her back into the ocean.”

Patricia stares into his eye as he places himself inside of her. She pulls on the ribbon that keeps his long hair in a tail, and sighs when it touches her face. Patricia’s head flings backwards and with both eyes closed she sees through the roof of the cabin, beyond the twinkling stars and out into the galaxy coated in streams of what looks like smoke and planets spraying space with violets and reds. When she lowers her gaze back onto him, he lifts his patch and has two eyes again.

“You’re a miracle!” he says.

Something shifts in her vision, like a curtain, and she can’t see anything to her left. Captain Andrew’s mouth is slack, just like her sisters’ when they gave her the conch of their blood. My sisters, she thinks. And then a memory fades in. Patricia on the night of her sixteenth birthday, her father comes into her room, drunk from blowfish poison.
He’s petting her head, touching her waist and telling her how much she looks like her
mother. She can’t remember what happened after that, except the next morning she laid
her first purse. It was a small, square black egg. Inside was a large yolk and a tiny
merchild. That was why she went to the surface for the first time. She remembers now, to
leave the purse out on the beach, to let it die and dry out.

“Patricia,” Captain Andrew says, “Your eye is gone!”

She hops out of the bed; her body rises in goose pimples from the cold room. She
braces her hands against the top of the dresser and looks into the mirror. Her left eye is
gone, a smooth bowl shape where it once was, not even a lash left behind.

Captain Andrew throws on a robe and stands behind her in the mirror. He moves
her hair over her shoulder and looks up and down her bare back. He wipes his tears with
his hand.

“The scars are all on your back,” he says.

She doesn’t bother to look. She believes him. She goes over to the bed and wraps
a sheet around her.

“Don’t leave!” he cries.

Patricia leaves the cabin room, stomps up the stairs. Captain Andrew follows her
to the bow of the ship.

“I have to go back to the sea,” she says. “My sisters need me.”

The moon is full and even more clear and large in the reflection of the ocean’s
water. He spins her around to face him.
“I love you,” he says. His tears gather to a point at the end of his chin. She takes her index finger and gathers a drop.

“I love you too,” she says.

She puts her finger in her mouth. The tear is salty on her tongue. By the time she pulls her finger out, she’s already on the floor of the ship with her legs melted together into one shiny blue tail.

Captain Andrew gathers her up in his arms and kisses the space between her breasts. His body breaks out into shivers, his skin slick with sweat, and his face flushes into a bright red. He kisses her on the lips and her smell reminds him of the lavender that used to grow on the trellis of his mother’s house when he was a kid. He tosses her over the side of the ship and watches her tail splashes down into the deep dark sea.

Patricia speeds to the bottom of the ocean, a stream of pearls jets out from her one eye. Instead of sinking into the ocean’s floor, the pearls are suspended near the surface water of the cove, creating the night sky inside the sea.

Patricia is in the cave of the sea witch and there the witch is on her throne made of fish bones, her wall of potions and bottles of curses behind her.

“What took you so long?” The sea witch hisses.

“What is it that you want from me? Or actually, why don’t you want anything from me?”

The sea witch raises one finger and points at Patricia’s face with her long sharp nail.
“You lost an eye. I can fix that.”

“Why are you helping me?”

The sea witch pulls a bone from the armrest.

“Because I love you,” she says and thrusts the bone into her heart. “Now drink up before it all goes to waste.”

The sea witch’s blood is thinner than a mermaid’s; it billows out of her like steam. The color is a pale green and all Patricia does is lean towards her and breathe it in through her mouth. She doesn’t understand why the sea witch loves her, but she wants her eye back.

The sea witch watches as her daughter’s eye heals, how the scars on her back fade. She’ll never know that I am Lucretia, the sea witch thinks. She’ll never know that I left them all so I could learn how to protect them later. And when she dies a tiny black pearl remains unnoticed on the throne’s seat, buried by the ashes of her body.

Patricia holds in her breath when she watches her nails grow into claws and feels the points of her teeth become sharp inside her mouth. I don’t want to be like her, she thinks. She swims away, back to her father’s kingdom.

At the palace, her father is lying in a bed of seaweed. All three of her sisters surround him in his bedchambers. All three at once call her name as she swims into the room. And all three have been given their eyes back.

“You’re back!”
“You look like the sea witch!”

“Father is dying!”

Patricia leans over her father’s writhing body. He grimaces when he sees her contorted features. In a trance, she presses her mouth to her father and breathes out all of the green smoke she sucked in from the sea witch. When Patricia pulls back, her father’s clothes and body turn into ashes. Her claws are fingernails again; her fangs retract.

“You killed him!” says the youngest.

“She put him out of his misery,” argued the second eldest.

“You’re the most powerful one now,” said the eldest. “You’re the new queen.”

Patricia sits on the throne. A slab of stone adorned with shells. All day she listens to her subjects, but her mind is somewhere else. She thinks about Captain Andrew, his cabin, if he still has his hook. The pain is so bad sometimes that most of her days she spends sleeping on the throne, while her sisters scuttle to maintain the kingdom around her.

On this day when she wakes up, the entire city left her. She is alone at the bottom of the ocean, too tired to cry. She places her hands on her chest and remembers that vision of the galaxy she had in the Captain’s cabin. A warm feeling that reminded her of when her sisters would play in the caves near the hot springs when they were little. She imagined that feeling seeping out of her hands and into her heart. She holds this vibration until it surrounds her. Until it grows and fills the throne room. Until it spreads throughout the kingdom and reaches to the surface. Until all of the merfolk come back to the city to
worship their queen, who provides them with all that they need. And when Queen Patricia, daughter of Lucretia, opens her eyes, she’ll see a figure of a man coming towards her, his silhouette shimmering between, hand and hook, foot and fin.